

**WOMEN ALONE:
WIDOWS IN THIRD REPUBLIC FRANCE, 1870-1940**

by

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ABSTRACT

An examination of widowhood in Third Republic France intersects with many other key themes of political, social and women's history. The lot of poor widows in the Third Republic was often poverty and hardship, and will lead to a consideration of broader questions regarding several aspects of women's lives, such as work and old age. We will see that widows, like women in general, had very few viable options to choose from when it came to earning a living, and often could not afford the luxury of retirement before death claimed them.

The different ways in which the government treated various categories of widows during the Third Republic will throw light on the complex evolution of the French welfare state. The slaughter of the First World War created hundreds of thousands of widows in a short period of time, with legislators deciding to provide these women with pensions and other forms of assistance. No matter how inadequate these were, they clearly differentiated war widows from "normal" ones and represented a marked increase in public welfare measures. In spite of this growing state interventionism, we will see that private charity (particularly of a religious nature) remained important to widows, demonstrating that the transition was slow, awkward and complex. The advent of war widows' associations during the 1920s highlights the difficulties faced by these women, and shows how people adapted to the state's new role and did not hesitate to make new demands of it.

The study of widows will also reveal much about cultural notions of proper femininity and gender roles: the government, charities and associations all relied on a popular, idealized image of the eternally faithful widow that emphasized "traditional" roles for women, particularly that of wife and mother. This will lead us to a consideration of natalism, an ideology which also influenced new welfare measures; it will become obvious that legislators and civil servants were often preoccupied with widows because of their children.

Ultimately, the difficulties and hardships of widows in the Third Republic reflected those of all women.

DEDICATION

Pour mes parents: merci pour votre encouragement et votre aide pendant toutes ces longues années . Cette oeuvre n'est possible que grâce à vous.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval	ii
Abstract	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vi
List of Major Government Agencies, Charities and Widows' Associations	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
The Welfare State, Natalism and Charity	2
The Perfect Widow/Woman as Mother and Wife	8
Widows and Work	12
Widows and Old Age	13
The Historiography of Widowhood	15
1: WIDOWS IN FRANCE: THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL	25
Widows' Work	28
Pensions	34
Mutual Aid	42
Old Widows and Hospices	51
2: WAR WIDOWS' PENSIONS AND THE WARDS OF THE NATION	66
Pensions	67
Behind the 1919 Pension Law	79
Wards of the Nation	85
The ONPN: Rhetoric and policies	90
The ONPN as Centralized Bureaucracy	100
Good Mothers and Bad Mothers	107
3: CHARITIES FOR WAR WIDOWS	115
Religious Charities	121
The <i>Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre</i>	125
<i>Association d'Assistance médicale aux veuves et orphelins des officiers de la guerre</i>	138
Charity in Disguise: <i>L'Assistance mutuelle des veuves de guerre</i>	142
4: WAR WIDOWS' ASSOCIATIONS	149
The Associations and Advocacy in the 1920s: Defending the Defenceless	153
The Catholic Union of War Widows	162
The Associations, Feminism and Suffrage	167
The Associations in the 1930s: Old Age, Work Conditions, Unemployment and Pacifism	171
The Associations and Remarried War Widows	178
New Associations for Remarried Widows and Ensuing Conflict	182
CONCLUSION	191

Appendix 1: Widows in Third Republic France: A Brief Statistical Overview	197
Appendix 2: Black Widows, White Widows: The Demographic Impact of the Great War . . .	205
Bibliography	213

List of Major Government Agencies, Charities and Widows' Associations

Government agencies

- Office National des Pupilles de la Nation (ONPN, National Office of the Wards of the Nation)
 - created 1917
 - merges with Office National des Anciens Combattants (Nat'l Office of Veterans) 1933
 - departmental branches throughout France

Charities

- Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre
 - created 1915
 - disbanded 1934
 - departmental branches throughout France
- Association d'assistance médicale aux veuves et orphelins des officiers de la guerre
 - created 1921
 - assisted the widows of officers only
 - inherits *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires'* resources and clients in 1934
- L'Assistance mutuelle des veuves de guerre
 - created 1914

Widows' Associations

- Departmental Association of War Widows, Orphans and Ascendents of Corrèze
 - small departmental organization affiliated with *Union fédérale des associations françaises des mutilés, réformés, veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*
- Departmental Association of the War Widows of the Charente-Inférieure
 - small departmental organization affiliated with *Union fédérale* as above
- Federation of War Widows
 - small departmental organization
- Catholic Union of War Widows
 - national organization based in Lyon

-Fédération nationale de veuves remariées (FNVR)

-founded c. 1928

-Union national des veuves de guerre (UNVG, for remarried widows only)

-founded c. 1928

INTRODUCTION

Fifteen years ago, French historian Yves Aubry encouraged his colleagues to rescue widows from historiographical obscurity, arguing that the condition of these women in the past revealed a great deal about a society's willingness and ability to take care of its weakest members.¹ Although Aubry was interested in the eighteenth century, his argument that the study of widowhood is "an investigation that places us at the crossroads of several different fields of historical inquiry: material history, history of the family, of solitude, of old age, to mention only the most obvious"² can be applied to any time period.

An important number of French women were widows at any given time during the seventy year history of the Third Republic, over two and a half million at the beginning of the twentieth century, meaning that they accounted for over 10% of the country's female population. The devastation of the Great War created over half a million war widows in less than five years.³ These numbers alone seem to make it worthwhile to find out how such women managed to live.

This is particularly important in the case of widows from the lower social strata, because of the challenges they faced. An examination of widowhood in Third Republic France intersects with many other key themes of political, social and women's history, and will lead us to consider broader questions regarding several aspects of women's lives, such as work and old age. We will see that widows, like women in general, had very few viable options to choose from when it came to earning a living and often could not afford the luxury of retirement before death claimed them.

The different ways in which the government treated various categories of widows during the years in questions (1870-1940) will throw light on the complex evolution of the French welfare state. The slaughter of the First World War created hundreds of thousands of new widows who benefited from the largesse of a government that considered it a solemn obligation to give these women pensions. No matter how inadequate these were, they clearly differentiated war widows from "normal" ones and marked an important extension of the government's responsibilities. In spite of the growing interventionism of the state, we will see that private charity (particularly of a religious nature) remained important to war widows, demonstrating that the transition towards a welfare state was slow, awkward and complex. The advent of war widows' associations during the 1920s will highlight the difficulties faced by these women and

1. Yves Aubry, "Pour une étude du veuvage féminin à l'époque moderne," *Histoire, Économie et Société* 8, no. 2 (1989): 223-36.

2. *Ibid.*, 224.

3. See Appendices 1 and 2.

the new expectations that they not had vis-a-vis the state.

We will see that the state's new role was motivated in large part by natalism, an omnipresent strain of thought which no discussion of French welfare can ignore. It will become obvious that French legislators and civil servants, alarmed by the country's low birthrate, were often only concerned with widows because of their children. These women, who were not citizens in the full sense of the word, were at a disadvantage in the face of the emerging welfare state, and the organizations representing them therefore often paid lip service to the idealized notion of widowhood and the importance of motherhood in order to gain political leverage. The study of widows will reveal much about cultural notions of proper gender roles in Third Republic France.

Unfortunately, the lives of individual French widows will remain obscure, but their collective experience will allow us to better understand important changes taking place in French society at the time, as well as the expectations and restrictions placed on French women as a whole.

The Welfare State, Natalism and Charity

Stanley Hoffmann's view of Third Republic France as a "stalled society,"⁴ once widely accepted, has been increasingly challenged by historians over the past two decades, and scholars now agree that the French were not as economically and socially backward as was once thought, even in matters of welfare.⁵ John Weiss was perhaps the first to claim that the Third Republic was marked by an extreme attitude of *laissez-faire* only during its early years, and that by the 1890s a more positive conception of the state was firmly entrenched in French political life. According to him, a "growing system of poor relief was beginning to bridge the gap between the good intentions of those who spoke of solidarity and the suffering of...their fellow citizens."⁶ Other historians agree that Third Republic governments had actually been quite forward-looking in matters of social welfare policy, particularly during the interwar period. Paul Dutton, for example, argues in his recent book that the current model of France's *securité sociale* owes a

4. Stanley Hoffmann, "Paradoxes of the French Political Community," in *In Search of France: The Economy, Society and Political System in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann and al. (Harvard: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 17.

5. For a discussion of the relevant literature published during the 1980s and early 90s, see Phillip Nord, "The Welfare State in France, 1870-1914," *French Historical Studies* 18, no. 3 (1994): 821-38.

6. John Weiss, "Origins of the French Welfare State: Poor Relief in the Third Republic, 1871-1914." *French Historical Studies* 13:1 (1983), 56, 58, 72. Weiss also mentioned in passing that widows were favourite targets of public assistance at the turn of the century, particularly if they had children.

great deal to the evolution of family welfare and social insurance between 1914 and 1945.⁷ Tim Smith goes further by claiming that World War I helped bring about several important social reforms that were later discounted by politicians in the 1940s and 1950s who wanted to make their own achievements appear more groundbreaking than they really were. In particular, Smith points to the law of 5 April 1928 on sickness, disability, maternity and old age insurance, calling it the “most important piece of social legislation in French history to date” and proof that interwar France was not the social failure that historians often tend to believe.⁸

The following will attempt to add a new dimension to the narrative of an increasingly interventionist Third Republic. Historians have so far overlooked the pensions and other forms of assistance provided to war widows by the state, despite the fact that these involved a very large amount of money and clearly represented a new level of interventionism. It is unreasonable to examine the development of French welfare during the 1920s and 30s without even considering the role that the government took upon itself when it came to assisting war widows.

Many scholars who have recently examined the evolution of the welfare state have focussed on those familiar bugbears of Third Republic France, the spectre of depopulation and the natalist response to it. Natalist organizations first came to prominence in the aftermath of the French defeat of 1870, but it was really only after the bloodbath of the Great War that people became more receptive to their arguments. The death of over 1.3 million Frenchmen meant that even eugenicists agreed that a repopulation policy was now necessary, and society was largely united in believing, at least in theory, that families had to start having more children. It was thanks to this prevailing ideological climate that the conservative Bloc National, which came to power in 1919, voted overwhelmingly to pass the “lois scélérates” of 31 July 1920, which made contraceptive propaganda, female-controlled means of birth control and inducement to abortion illegal. Three years later, the government passed a law making the penalties for abortion the most severe in Europe.⁹ Different legislators took slightly different approaches to encourage

7. Paul Dutton, *Origins of the French Welfare State: The Struggle for Social Reform in France, 1914-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.

8. Tim Smith, *Creating the Welfare State in France, 1880-1940* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 3-4. Arguably, the shift away from charity and towards welfare discussed here had actually begun during the Great Revolution, although this was a very short-lived phenomenon that was ended by the Directory and the Empire. Isser Woloch, “From Charity to Welfare in Revolutionary Paris,” *Journal of Modern History* 58, no. 4 (1986).

9. Andrés Horacio Reggiani, “Procreating France: The Politics of Demography, 1919-1945,” *French Historical Studies* 19, no. 3 (1996), 731-732; Marie-Monique Huss, “Pronatalism in the Interwar Period in France,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 25 (1990): 62-65.

rising birthrates, but all were concerned first and foremost with children, and often saw the women who bore and raised them as little more than means to an end.¹⁰ According to Mary-Louise Roberts, the pervasiveness and universality of natalist discourse during the interwar period was overwhelming: the blame for the declining birthrate was placed squarely on the shoulders of women while the role of men was ignored, and mothers became “a symbol of rebirth, healing, redemption and restoration from the war’s moral trauma.”¹¹

Recent works on the rise of the welfare state in France have revealed the natalist agenda that lay behind this development. In 1990, Seth Koyen and Sonya Michel actually criticized women’s historians and feminist theorists for exaggerating the state’s contribution in perpetuating patriarchy and arguing that state welfare programs were (and are) intended primarily to regulate women’s productive and reproductive lives. The two historians argued that while this approach highlighted the gender implications of supposedly sex-neutral policies, it also made women come across as passive, disorganized, and helpless victims oppressed by the male state.¹² In spite of their emphasis on women’s agency, Koyen and Michel admitted that the situation had varied greatly from one country to another, and that where the centralized state had been strong, women’s voices had been largely ignored. According to them, this was particularly true of France, where during the Third Republic anxieties about depopulation and the fear of military weakness meant that the struggle over control of maternalist political rhetoric was high-stakes and fierce. In marked contrast to the Anglo-American democracies, the French state considered family issues to be a matter of national interest, something that was simply too

10. Legislators can be divided in two broad groups when it comes to the issue of depopulation: patriarchal patriots, who were more concerned with men, and solidarist republicans whose first priority was women. The patriarchal patriots argued that the male-dominated family was the keystone of French society and that the only way to fight the depopulation crisis was to encourage such families to have as many children as possible. Solidarists were more willing to offer social assistance programs to all mothers, even illegitimate ones, believing that a fertile single mother was better than a married one who chose not to have children. However, while the Solidarists were more open to feminist demands, they ultimately shared the patriarchal patriots’ willingness to support the regulation of birth control and abortion in order to combat depopulation. Jean Pedersen, “Regulating Abortion and Birth Control: Gender, Medicine, and Republican Politics in France, 1870-1920,” *French Historical Studies* 19, no. 3 (1996), 680-681, 683. For a more in-depth discussion, see Karren M. Offen, “Depopulation, Nationalism and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France,” *American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 648-76; idem, “Body Politics: Women, Work and the Politics of Motherhood in France, 1920-1950,” in *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s-1950s*, ed. Gisela Bock and Pat Thane (London: Routledge, 1991), 138-59.

11. Mary-Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 91.

12. Seth Koyen and Sonya Michel, “Womanly Duties: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States in France, Germany, Great Britain the United States, 1880-1920,” *American Historical Review* 95, no. 4 (1990), 1081-1084.

important to be left in the hands of women. As a result, male politicians created social welfare policies for women and children.¹³

Susan Pedersen's 1994 comparison of the British and French welfare systems during the interwar period confirmed Koven and Michel's analysis. Pedersen agreed that French feminists had little influence over social policy (partly because they were so weak), but that French women did benefit from the generosity of the state.¹⁴ Pedersen also argued that the French politicians who created welfare measures had been motivated by both the fear of depopulation and the ideal of the "mother by the hearth" (*mère au foyer*), despite the fact that the French labour force included more women than most European countries. Ultimately, Pedersen considered gender to have been central to the formation of the welfare state, which was to a large extent targeted at women, or rather at their children.¹⁵ Likewise, Elinor Acampo, Rachel Fuchs and Mary Lynn Stewart argued that the men who influenced welfare policy in the Third Republic were motivated by both natalist impulses and traditional, Rousseauistic views of the Republican family.¹⁶

British feminist Vera Brittain once claimed that it was thanks to the welfare state that "women have become ends in themselves and not merely means to ends of men,"¹⁷ but this certainly did not apply to France during the interwar period. We will see that natalist impulses lay behind many of the new measures used by the government to help war widows. Politicians tended to see these women as mothers above all else, providing them with pensions and other forms of assistance mainly in order to assist their children. The remarriage of war widows, a

13. Ibid., 1088, 1099, 1105-1106. Pat Thane and Gisela Bock made many of the same points as Koven and Michel a year later, arguing that historians had tended to overlook the degree to which welfare measures were historically geared towards women, particularly mothers. Gisela Bock and Pat Thane, "Introduction," in *Gender Politics: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s-1950s*, eds. Gisela Bock and Pat Thane. For a grand narrative of the effects of gender on the development of the welfare state in the United States, see Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Harvard: The Belknap Press, 1992).

14. Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France 1914-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 20. Pedersen recognized the complexity of the situation by rejecting any overly simplistic explanation for the rise of the welfare state, which she argued was not simply the result of governmental diktats.

15. Tim Smith's recent book has little on the gender question, but the author nevertheless argued that pronatalism was the guiding factor behind all social policy during the Third Republic. Tim Smith, *Creating the Welfare State in France*, 113.

16. Elinor Acampo, Rachel G. Fuchs, and Mary Lynn Stewart, *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform in France, 1870-1914* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), particularly the chapter by Fuchs ("The Right to Life: Paul Strauss and the Politics of Motherhood").

17. Quoted in Gisela Bock, "Poverty and Mothers' Rights in the Emerging Welfare States," in *A History of Women in the West. Volume V. Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Françoise Thébaud (Harvard: Belknap Press, 1994), 405.

topic that will frequently crop up, was such a contentious issue largely because of the natalist concerns surrounding it. French legislators and bureaucrats were concerned that the remarriage of war widows was detrimental to the fertility of the nation, since there was a shortfall of marriageable men in interwar France (at least in theory: see Appendix 2) and priority had to be given to younger and supposedly more fertile women. Although a 1925 law did penalize remarried war widows and led to a decrease in their pension, the attitude of the government was ultimately ambiguous and self-contradictory, defying any attempt to make generalizations about a state that was less than monolithic.

The advent of the welfare state was neither quick nor simple, but many of the accounts mentioned above have little to say about how state-sponsored programs only replaced other traditional means of assistance in a slow, imperfect and patchwork fashion. The fact is that the line between charity and social welfare was not always clear in Third Republic France,¹⁸ and recent work on the period has emphasized the continuing importance of charitable works and their symbiotic relationships with public assistance. By 1914, federal law guaranteed assistance to a number of disadvantaged French individuals, but the responsibility for such services was left to cash-strapped municipalities, which often had little choice but to work in cooperation with private charities. As a result, religious fraternities such as the Sisters of Charity helped operate municipal relief centres in Bordeaux, while that city's public *Dépôt de mendicité* was funded and operated by a private association.¹⁹ The situation was similar in Paris, where Paul Strauss, one of the foremost social reformers and political figures of the Third Republic, also believed in a mixture of public welfare and private charity. Unable to secure sufficient public funds for his welfare programs, Strauss actively encouraged private charitable organizations to create institutions to assist mothers and cooperate with government agencies.²⁰ The need for all French associations to be licensed prior to 1901 ensured that charities always essentially functioned under some form of government oversight, and favoured an atmosphere of cooperation between

18. It is all too easy for the unwary to be confused. For example, *bureaux de bienfaisance* were theoretically public institutions, but they were in fact largely financed by private charities and therefore remained independent from the state. We will see that such an interplay between public and private assistance continued well into the interwar period, at least as far as war widows were concerned. Olivier Faure, "Health Care Provision and Poor Relief in 19th Century Provincial France," in *Health Care and Poor Relief in 18th and 19th Century Northern Europe*, eds. Ole Peter Grell, Andrew Cunningham and Robert Jutte (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 313.

19. Steven M. Beaudoin, "'Without Belonging to Public Service': Charities, the State, and Civil Society in Third Republic Bordeaux, 1870-1914," *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 3 (1998): 672-675.

20. For example, Strauss worked with the private and secular *Société philanthropique* to establish the Asile Michelet, a refuge-workshop for homeless pregnant women in 1894. Elinor Acampo, Rachel G. Fuchs, and Mary Lynn Stewart, *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform in France*, 87-90, 94.

public and private. In short, charities played a vital role in municipal poor relief, usually with the blessing and full support of the authorities.²¹

In Chapter 3, we will see that war widows were the beneficiaries of a number of specialized charities that were created to assist them during the war. The important role played by these organizations demonstrates the extent to which philanthropy, often in an overtly religious guise, was still important during the Third Republic in spite of the growing number of welfare measures. Not only did private charity and public welfare co-exist during the Third Republic, but the two were inextricably entwined: certain of the charities we will examine received generous subventions from the state, and this often makes it all but impossible to determine where private relief efforts end and governmental ones begin. The philanthropic organizations devoted to widows also demonstrate the patronizing class bias that often lay at the heart of the charitable enterprise, although this was in many ways similar to the attitudes of the bureaucrats responsible for delivering state aid.

The following examination of war widows will cast light on the development of the welfare state in France, the natalist agenda that lurked behind it, and its uneasy co-existence with (and dependence on) traditional charities. As we will see in Chapter 1, widows as a group did not benefit from any specific form of assistance from the French state during the Third Republic and had to eke out a living by combining various sources of income, including mutual aid,²² tiny pensions and rudimentary welfare payments. However, in 1917 and 1919 hundreds of thousands of war widows were granted pensions and, if they had children, special subventions. Such widows represent the transition to a more interventionist welfare state and the pitfalls that accompanied such a process. The government was willing to help war widows, but also sought to control and supervise them while invading their privacy, was all too eager to differentiate

21. Steven M. Beaudoin, "'Without Belonging to Public Service,'" 678-679, 689. Even Henri Monod, the Director of the Public Assistance from 1887 to 1905 and one of the founding fathers of the French welfare state, wanted private charities and public welfare to work together in harmony. Monod bluntly admitted that the government did not have the resources to assist all the nation's poor and that help therefore had to be sought wherever it could be found. While he clearly preferred public assistance to charity, he was also enough of a realist to realize that the replacement of charitable organizations by state intervention would be a long-term process that would take years, if not decades. Rachel G. Fuchs, "From the Private to the Public *devoir*: Henri Monod and Public Assistance," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* 17 (1990): 377-78.

22. According to certain historians, mutual aid societies actually formed the basis of the complex patchwork of public assistance schemes that began to form what one might call a rudimentary "welfare state" of sorts during the 1920s. However, the evidence presented below rather belies this claim. Paul Dutton, *Origins of the French Welfare State*, 3, 5, 38 *passim*.

between “good” and “bad” mothers, and seemed more interested in centralization²³ than in providing these women with the help they needed. However, these unpleasant aspects of state interventionism were always tempered with pragmatism, and there is no doubt that war widows were, relatively speaking, “fortunate.”

Nevertheless, not all war widows were content to remain passive in the face of the interventionist state that sought both to help and control them, and many banded together in associations to fight for their new-found rights and demand higher pensions. This was a new development, one that hinted at the changing relationship between the welfare state and its citizens who now felt a sense of entitlement. As far as war widows were concerned, however, the result was strangely paradoxical: while these women behaved in an overtly political manner, they were ultimately powerless vis-a-vis the government because they were not citizens.²⁴ These women felt that the government owed them something and were not afraid to ask for it, but were ultimately forced to appeal to a male audience’s sense of duty. In so doing, they often had to use natalist discourse to their advantage and adopt the stereotypical image of the war widow that was widely bandied about.

The Perfect Widow/Woman as Mother and Wife

The fact was that widows did not fit easily into French society, a situation that was only made worse during the 1920s after the sudden appearance of hundreds of thousands of such women. In her book *Civilization Without Sexes*, Mary-Louise Roberts examined how gendered images served as a way to discuss the meaning of social changes such as Americanization and a rapidly developing consumer culture. She claimed that after the war, three images of women

23. Implicit in all scholarly discussions of the rise of the welfare state, regardless of whether or not these adopt a gendered perspective, is the belief that this process entailed greater centralization (Tim Smith believes that the tension between local and national forms of assistance was the hallmark of the rise of the welfare state). As the state became more interventionist, decision-making became more and more concentrated in the national capital, where bureaucrats made key decisions and their subordinates throughout the country were expected to do little more than carry these out. The assistance provided to war widows with children during the 1920s mirrored this process perfectly, with the Parisian leadership being particularly careful to make sure that national guidelines were followed, even at the cost of ignoring regional variations and the expertise of local administrators. Tim Smith, *Creating the Welfare State in France*, 34, 40, 54.

24. As we will see, their attempts at influencing policy were therefore at best only partially successful, hampered by women’s inability to vote and perhaps also by a tradition of conservative and timid French feminism. After years of stagnation, the creation of the *Conseil national des femmes françaises* in 1901 heralded the age of mass movement feminism in France. However, the movement was often extremely moderate in nature, and its leaders did not place as much importance on suffrage as their British counterparts. James. H. McMillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 199, 202-203, 217

dominated the debate about gender: the “garçonne,” who represented change; the mother, a much older archetype that represented continuity and served the state by having children; and the single woman, an uneasy effort to find some sort of common ground between the two other categories.²⁵ Obviously, the six hundred thousand women widowed during the Great War were not easily assimilated into these groups. While many of them were certainly mothers, they did not fit the preconceived image where a husband and father was constantly present to support (and control) his wife and children. Likewise, while all widows were technically “single,” it was difficult to confuse them with spinsters. The only way that a widow could comfortably fit into any of these categories was by remarrying, which many of them certainly did (see Appendix 2). However, those that did not were still very visible thanks to their paradoxical condition of being neither truly single nor married.²⁶

In practice, however, the war widow was defined first and foremost as a mother. She was also frequently classified as a wife, despite the fact that her husband was dead. The literature of the period, which we will see reflected in the rhetoric of law makers and the publications of various associations and charitable organizations, was very clear on this point:

The silent widows passed me by, seeing nothing, hearing nothing... “Dead,” “never,” “alone,” a peal of thunder seems to accompany each of these words as they tear into the women’s hearts... The shade of the fallen hero sometimes enters and stands behind her... Little heads crowned with unruly locks now appear before her and ask “When is daddy coming back?” And the widow embraces her children savagely, and with them the memory of her husband... She lives and breathes, but is indifferent to everything around them, a stranger to the crowd and the noise of life...²⁷

Here we see “woman” as someone who lives not for herself, but for others: once her better half has been taken from her, life practically loses all meaning and interest. She would no doubt gladly kill herself in order to join her husband if it were not for her remaining responsibilities. A good woman is a good mother, and so she must bear the agony of life a while longer in order to raise her children: to do otherwise would be to betray the memory of her husband. However, it

25. Mary-Louise Roberts, *Civilizations Without Sexes*. Interestingly, Roberts does not pay a great deal of attention to war widows, and the same is true of Susan Grayzel’s study of gender in wartime France. Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France During the First World War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 4-5, 8.

26. The problem of how widows were to fit into society was always more acute after lengthy wars which decimated the male population. German war widows of the Second World War faced many of the same problems (inadequate pensions and unrealistic social expectations) as their French counterparts from the 1920s. Elizabeth Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 162.

27. The extract is from a small booklet of atrociously bad poetry about war widows published in 1918. Pierre Aquétant, *Pour celles qui pleurent* (np: 1918), 34-35.

was possible that a war widow's children would provide her with some comfort and possibly with a few moments of fleeting joy. After all, those "little heads crowned with unruly locks" were like pale reflections of the dearly departed husband.

Other writers offered explicit advice to war widows, and as one might expect they did not advocate personal fulfilment or trying to rebuild one's life by finding another man. The newly widowed woman, nearly overcome with despair, was told to pull herself together: "No! Everything is not finished: there is God, there is France, there are the children. You do not have the right to let your pain overwhelm you: you must be strong, you must live. Your husband was heroic when he came face-to-face with death, so how dare you be afraid of life?" The war widow's first duty was to provide for and raise her children, and this "sacred task" had the benefit of keeping despair at bay. The writer warned widows that the road ahead would be difficult, particularly thanks to certain unmentionable and ungodly impulses: "Your youth weighs on you and frightens you; you feel your unused forces boiling within you, ready to burst out in revolt. Will these have to be smothered and silenced for you to find peace? No, but they will have to be mastered..." Finally, war widows were explicitly enjoined to raise their children and act as a sort of living monument to their deceased husbands.²⁸ The fear of unchecked female sexuality freed from male control is striking, but even more important is the implication that the ideal widow was an eternally faithful one who would never give her heart to another man.²⁹

The idea that perpetual widowhood is far more laudable than remarriage is an old one in Western civilization, dating back to Antiquity,³⁰ but war widows had to deal with even greater social expectations. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker claim that public commemorations in France transformed the war dead into heroes driven by patriotism, altruism and love of their families and fellow citizens.³¹ As one historian who studied war widows in the French North-East put it,

War widows were above all the victims of external factors. The country wanted to make

28. *Aux veuves de la guerre: Dieu, la France, nos enfants. Par une veuve de guerre* (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1916), no pagination. Such advice would have been dear to the heart of the most ardent of Republicans, but the author of this little booklet also insisted that a war widow could find a certain degree of peace and contentment by devoting her life to God.

29. For a discussion of the European stereotype of the ideal widow as chaste and devoted to the welfare of her children, see Sylvia Hahn, "Women in Older Ages - 'Old' Women?" *History of the Family* 7, no. 1 (2002): 8-13.

30. Christianity gave new impetus to the notion, going so far as to proclaim that widowhood was a morally superior condition to that of marriage. Scarlett Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, *Être veuve sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Belin, 2001), 29-32.

31. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18, Retrouver la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 221, 223.

these women into eternal widows, priestesses of the Cult of the Hero. As if it was not enough for them to have lost their husband for the sake of the nation, they were required to offer up their youth and indeed their whole lives on the altar of this new cult. For many, a remarried war widow was a traitor, unworthy of her first husband.³²

Likewise, historian Françoise Thébaud concluded that French society saw the ideal war widow as an embodiment of a fidelity that transcended death, finding its expression in perpetual celibacy and a devotion to raising one's children in the way that "he" would have wanted.³³

We will encounter many more examples of what I would call a secular cult of the war dead when we look at the publications of war victims' associations and the deliberations of the Office of the Wards of the Nation. Such aggrandizing rhetoric did not make it any easier for widows (or orphans) to pick up the pieces of their lives and move on. War widows were more "fortunate" than their civilian counterparts, in the sense that the government provided them with pensions and allocations. But, as we will see, this money was usually understood as a reward of sorts for the actions of their husbands, and war widows had to spend the rest of their lives living up to this in a way that other widows did not. Nevertheless, war widows and the organizations representing them frequently used and abused these images and stereotypes in an attempt to further their own cause.

Despite the rhetoric, it is vital to note that there was a marked differentiation between the working class and the peasantry on one hand and the bourgeoisie on the other when it came to expectations regarding a widow's "fidelity" towards her dead husband. Women of the well-off middle class were the ones who were supposed, at least in theory, to display eternal loyalty. It was widely recognized that a widow from a more humble background could not afford such sentimental luxuries, which would in many cases have led to a hand-to-mouth existence for herself and her children.³⁴ Ideals could not compete with more pragmatic considerations, and nearly half of all war widows remarried fairly quickly (see Appendix 2). Most people, even those who promoted the image of the eternally chaste widow whose only concern was her family,

32. Stéphanie Petit, *Les veuves de la Grande Guerre*, Mémoire de maîtrise dirigé par M. Audoin-Rouzeau, professeur à l'Université de Picardie-Jules Verne. Amiens: 1998, 102. For a discussion of the "secular religion" of the war dead in interwar France, see Antoine Prost, "Les Monuments Aux Morts: Culte Republicain? Culte Civique? Culte Patriotique?" in *Les Lieux de Mémoire. 1. La République. La Nation. Les Frances.*, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 199-223.

33. Françoise Thébaud, "La guerre et le deuil chez les femmes françaises", in J.-J. Becker, Jay M. Winter, Gard Drumeich, Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, eds., *Guerre et cultures 1914-1918* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1994), 107.

34. In her study of Amiens, Stéphanie Petit claimed that only 2% of officers' widows remarried, compared to 94% of those for simple soldiers. Stéphanie Petit, *Les veuves de la Grande Guerre*, 102. Unfortunately, Ms. Petit does not make it clear where this information comes from.

recognized this reality and were not greatly troubled by it, showing that there was often a good deal of latitude when it came to such stereotypes. Ironically, cynical and hard-headed natalist thinking sometimes softened the effects of societal expectations on war widows. Government agencies, like society at large, expected such women to adhere to rigid moral standards, but bureaucrats were often willing to overlook minor transgressions, such pragmatism being justified by a concern for the widow's children.

Widows and Work

Recent historical writing on industrialization and working-class life in nineteenth-century France, although rarely dealing directly with widows, reveals the problems that such women must have faced when trying to find employment. In their ground-breaking study of women and work in Britain and France, Joan Scott and Louise Tilly argued that industrialization did not greatly change the kind of work that women did. Women were found in the least industrialized sectors of the labour force, with piece work in the garment trades being particularly popular, despite the fact that such jobs were often temporary and paid very poorly. As the French economy began to rely more and more on heavy industry rather than textile during the late nineteenth century, the number of jobs available for women in the manufacturing sector shrank. After the turn of the century, the tertiary sector grew rapidly and became an attractive option for women, albeit one where the pay was still poor and job security minimal. The most important point made by Tilly and Scott is the way that female work was continually undervalued despite superficial changes that accompanied industrialization and changes in the economic landscape. Tilly and Scott's pioneering work was, as they themselves acknowledged, a preliminary and sometimes rough survey that has since been fleshed out and elaborated by historians. However, the inadequate earning power of women and their limited alternatives in comparison to men has never been put in doubt.³⁵

Deborah Simonton's recent work on female labour in nineteenth-century Europe, in which she pointed out that women were frequently considered to be casual, temporary employees rather than "real" workers, fully supports Tilly's and Scott's account. Simonton found that women's perceived docility and their (genuine) cheapness relative to men made them seem like very desirable employees. The truth was that women *did* tend to work intermittently, particularly once they were married, a fact which reinforced the image of them as part-time

35. Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1978).

workers and appeared to justify paying them lower wages than men. Employers came to see women as a reserve army of inexpensive labour, a tendency that was most clearly manifested during the two world wars. Meanwhile the very notion of “skill” became understood as an exclusively male attribute, ensuring that women never had access to the highest-paying jobs.³⁶

For her part, Elinor Accampo emphasized the degree to which the availability of profitable outwork declined during the nineteenth century, hampering the ability of wives and children to earn money. Like Scott and Tilly, Accampo argued that the industrialization and the rise of factory work had already harmed the economic status of women by making it impossible for them to contribute to family income by assisting their husband in their work. Such findings do not seem to bode well for widows, and Accampo claimed that, at least in the small French village of St. Chamond on which she based her study, widowhood forced women back into factories, where they sometimes continued to work into their eighties.³⁷

We will see that many widows were forced to rely on home work. Even those “fortunate” widows who lost their husbands on the battlefield of the Great War had to seek out employment more often than not, and found their choices extremely limited, particularly as they grew older and the national economy was hit by crisis. A further complication was that government agencies, charities and widows’ associations were extremely ambivalent when it came to war widows working outside the home. Although certain charity and self-help groups understood that widows had to work because of the inadequacy of pensions, certain organizations often frowned upon such behaviour and deemed it unsuitable for mothers. At other times, politicians and civil servants forcefully encouraged war widows to work when the national economy needed it, particularly during the labour shortage of the war and postwar years. Whether or not these women should work was not based on their personal needs or wishes, but rather on their roles as mothers and on external economic factors, demonstrating that Simonton was quite right to argue that women acted as a pool of “reserve” labour.

Widows and Old Age

Just as the working lives of widows forces one to consider broader themes of female employment throughout history, so does the elderly widow require consideration of old age.

36. Deborah Simonton, *A History of European Women's Work: 1700 to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1998), 247, 263-265. Women’s virtues as workers lay in their supposed quickness, nimbleness and patience, which made them particularly well suited for repetitive assembly-line work and, most of all, sewing: we will see that this was still considered the ideal female occupation during the 1920s and 30s.

37. Elinor Accampo, *Industrialization, Family Life and Class Relations: Saint Chamond, 1815-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 76, 85.

Looking at the literature, it is obvious that historians have tended to overlook old age as a category of analysis: there is a dearth of serious monographs on the subject, although this has now slowly started to change. French historian Christine Piette argued ten years ago that “the history of old age is still young,” but is invaluable because it overlaps with the study of poverty, solitude, widowhood and even suicide. These problems, according to Piette, had always been part and parcel of old age, but they took on a new dimension during the nineteenth and early twentieth century as the population of France began to grow older.³⁸

The study of old age in a broader international context leads one to believe that there was an important overlap between this stage in the life cycle and poverty during the nineteenth century, especially as far as widows were concerned. In her recent work on the history of the aged in British society, Pat Thane attacks many of the assumptions that both laymen and certain historians make about old people in past societies. It is in this spirit that she derides the tenacious belief that the elderly have traditionally depended almost exclusively on their families for support.³⁹ According to Thane, a large number of old British people were partly dependent on poor relief throughout the nineteenth century, although they “often received very little, very late in life and grudgingly” and therefore had to find other ways to make ends meet. This meant paid work of some sort, and a survey of York in 1899 illustrates how many old people tried to patch together pitiful incomes by taking in lodgers, knitting or doing laundry.⁴⁰ Charles Booth’s social investigations of the 1880s showed that 40% of people over the age of sixty-five in east London were paupers and that this grim fate was rarely due to personal failings, but rather to the simple inability to earn a living. Booth became an advocate of universal old age pensions, a position that was bolstered by the Royal Commission on the Aged Poor of 1893, which revealed

38. Christine Piette, “Vieillesse et pauvreté chez les Parisiennes,” *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History* no. 23 (1996): 297, 299-300. Looking at Paris during the Restoration period, Piette found that old women were becoming more numerous, were more often than not widows, and were one of the most disadvantaged groups in the city. Another historian, Elise Feller, argued that historical works on women have tended to focus on those areas that were considered important by men and where their influence could be seen the most clearly, such as education, marriage and procreation. Feller claimed that historians have therefore largely ignored old women. Elise Feller, “Les femmes et le vieillissement dans la France du premier XXe siècle,” *Clio* no. 7 (1998), 199-202.

39. Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12. It is interesting to contrast these assertions with those of Sherri Klassen on eighteenth-century Toulouse: Klassen found that most elderly women were supported by friends and families, and that such assistance was apparently the result of a sense of moral duty rather than the hope of financial gain. Sherri Klassen, “Old and Cared for: Place of Residence for Elderly Women in Eighteenth-Century Toulouse,” *Journal of Family History* 24, no. 1 (1999), 35, 40, 45.

40. Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 171, 213.

growing indigence among the elderly.⁴¹

Stung into action by such revelations, the British government passed the Old Age Pensions Act in 1908, which provided small monthly payments to the very old and poor, as long as they were deemed respectable. The first old age pensions were paid out to just under half a million people in January 1909, most of them women, and most of these no doubt widows.⁴² Indeed, Thane argues that it was recognized at the time that greater female longevity left many old women in a state of widowed poverty, while the limited amount of available work and low pay made it almost impossible for them to earn a living. As a result, poor old women faced a harsh struggle for existence and often suffered greater poverty than men through no fault of their own.⁴³

The condition of many older French widows was very likely every bit as grim as that of their English counterparts, although this is impossible to verify until more research has been done. In the meantime, we do catch the odd glimpse of elderly widows working long days in tiny, cramped rooms to eke out a living. We also come across a disproportionate number of elderly widows when we look at Parisian hospices, institutions that combined welfare, charity and self-help and which managed to provide such women with a relatively safe and comfortable environment in which to pass their last days.

The Historiography of Widowhood

In 1991, historian Ida Blom was able to claim that research on the history of widows was simply not attracting a great deal of attention.⁴⁴ She explained that this was a grave error, since widowhood had long been an important part of the life-cycle of the average woman, a stage that was all the more interesting since the ideology of domesticity that was so prevalent during the nineteenth and early twentieth century created special problems for a woman without a male provider, notably by making it difficult for her to find employment. Blom acknowledged that

41. *Ibid.*, 174, 177. The Commission found that it was not uncommon in certain communities for old people to beg from door to door.

42. *Ibid.*, 225-226. There has been some disagreement among British historians regarding the effect of the Old Age Pensions Act on the lifestyles and residence patterns of the elderly. As far as widows were concerned, little seems to have changed: more of them lived with their children during the 1920s than before the war, but this was probably a result of extraneous factors. Richard Wall, "Elderly Widows and Widowers and their Coresidents in Late 19th and Early 20th-Century England and Wales," *History of the Family* 7, no. 1 (2002): 139-55.

43. Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 271-272.

44. Ida Blom, "The History of Widowhood: a Bibliographic Overview," *Journal of Family History* 16, no. 2 (1991), 191.

young women and spinsters also experienced such difficulties, but argued that widows were particularly worthy of closer study because of the sudden transition from one condition to the other that they experienced.⁴⁵

The truth is that the body of historical works dealing with widows is not insignificant, but much of it deals with the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, leaving something of a dearth as far as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are concerned. This situation may at first seem paradoxical, since the greater availability of source materials should make a study of “modern” widows much more feasible than one focussing on an earlier period. However, the answer to the problem can be gleaned by looking at the particular kind of widows discussed in the literature. When scholars examine the life of a medieval widow, it is almost always that of a noblewoman, simply because her existence left traces for the historian, whether in the form of wills, bequests, various legal documents, or biographies. As the centuries roll by, the study of widows becomes increasingly “democratic,” with works on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often dealing with women who may be described as “middle class,” marriage contracts and other legal documents allowing historians to make certain generalizations about their business activities before and after marriage.

However, the interest of historians in European widows surprisingly fails to increase as we approach the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Why should this be? While there were fewer noble widows around than previously, there were more middle-class ones than ever before, and the details of their lives, and even those of working-class and peasant widows, should in theory be more accessible. This may be true, but the historian who wishes to study widows in modern European society is faced with a problem of “information overload:” there is certainly a considerable amount of data relating to such women lying in wait in various archives, but retrieving it is extremely difficult and time-consuming. The relevant documentation is buried among a huge quantity of material of various sorts that deals with the population as a whole, and the sifting process necessary to bring the lives of widows to light is a daunting one.⁴⁶

45. Idem., “Widowhood: From the Poor Law Society to the Welfare Society: The Case of Norway, 1875-1964,” *Journal of Women's History* 4, no. 2 (1992): 52. Blom argued that historical neglect of widows could be explained by several factors, such as the emphasis on other stages of the female life cycle during the initial years following the advent of women's history. She suggested that practitioners of women's history themselves may have been responsible for this oversight due to the fact that they initially concentrated on women in the past who resembled them (in other words, those who were young, regardless of whether or not they had children). Ida Blom, “The History of Widowhood”, 192.

46. In his 1989 article on widows (page 1), Yves Aubry was forced to admit these difficulties even as he suggested strategies to learn more about widows. He recommended that historians concentrate on notarial records, which he believed have the potential to help draw a statistical portraits of widows. However, he admitted that one could easily be misled by the documents, and conceded that “to find anything more in

Due to the limitations of available source material, the scanty corpus of historiographical works dealing with widows during the Middle Ages and the early modern period focuses on the nobility and the propertied classes. Indeed, historians writing on non-noble widows in the Middle Ages are few and far in between. The difficulty of “spotting” widows in the historical record in order to learn about them is illustrated by Brigitte Gauthier’s study of widows in fifteenth-century Lyon, in which the author is simply unable to uncover a great deal of information.⁴⁷ More typical of works on medieval widows is the collection of essays edited by Louise Mirrer in 1992, which focussed almost exclusively on “better off” widows. According to the editor, this was a matter of necessity, since it is practically impossible to study poor widows of the medieval and early modern periods for want of documentation.⁴⁸

At least one historian has attempted to provide quantitative analyses of widowhood in the pre-industrial past, but this serves only to reveal the difficulties inherent in such an enterprise. Alain Bideau examined a small town near the Saone river between the years 1670 and 1840 to determine how likely widows were to remarry, believing that the number of children a woman had would greatly affect this decision. However, Bideau began by warning his readers of the limitations of the study, stating that, “in practice, serious difficulties arise because of a

such material than vague generalizations or a handful of cases that may or may not be representative will be difficult, thanks largely to the very large number of documents that would need to be examined.” This is even more true as far the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are concerned, thanks to the ever-increasing output of governments. Yves Aubry, “Pour une étude du veuvage féminin,” 230-232.

47. Brigitte Gauthier, “Des veuves lyonnaises au XVe siècle,” *Cahiers d'Histoire* 26, no. 4 (1981): 353, 355. One of the few sources that were available were fiscal records, but these only mentioned women who were heads of family. Thus, the city’s 1,388 property records identify eighty-eight widows, but we know nothing about others who lived as dependents with relatives. Furthermore, we cannot tell what may have been the occupations of these widows.

48. Louise Mirrer, *Upon My Husband’s Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 1-4. Mirrer is most often concerned with society’s attitudes towards such women and with the independence and authority they were able to exercise after their husbands’ deaths. There is disagreement over whether comfortably middle-class widows found their new marital status to be a blessing in disguise or were as dependent as ever on their male relatives. Barbara Diefendorf (“Widowhood and Remarriage in Sixteenth-Century Paris,” *Journal of Family History* 7, no. 4 (1982)) emphasized that a sixteenth-century widow found herself in full control of her person and property for the first time in her life, while Sherrin Marshall Wyntjes (“Survivors and Status: Widowhood and Family in the Early Modern Netherlands,” *Journal of Family History* 7, no. 4 (1982)) demonstrated that the legal rights of Dutch widows during the early modern period gave them real power and authority. However, Julie Hardwick (“Widowhood and Patriarchy in Seventeenth Century France,” *Journal of Social History* 26, no. 1 (1992)) argued that legal access to property was not enough to “empower” these newly single women, who quickly found themselves reined in by the dominant patriarchal culture in which they lived, mainly through their male relatives. For a recent collection of essays dealing with widows prior to the modern era, see *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edited by Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (Harlow: Longman, 1999).

number of people widowed in one parish remarry outside it.”⁴⁹ The research provides tantalizing bits of information, such as the fact that widows under the age of forty in this small town remarried more often than not,⁵⁰ but such conclusions must unfortunately be taken with more than a pinch of salt. Even if the above limitation is ignored, there is absolutely no guarantee that a similar pattern would hold true for the rest of the country, and the reader is therefore left with little more than an isolated and possibly irrelevant set of data.

One work on the Early Modern period that deserves special mention is Scarlett Beauvalet-Boutouyrie’s *Être veuve sous l’ancien régime*, an ambitious undertaking that sets out to describe the condition of French widows from all social strata during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To begin with, Beauvalet-Boutouyrie made the interesting discovery that over a third of all French couples enjoyed thirty years or more of married life during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵¹ This naturally means that the average widow in the Ancien Régime was an older woman much like her more modern counterpart.⁵² Beauvalet, whose background is in law, made remarkable use of judicial records to show how a large number of widows benefited from their new status. A careful study of Parisian marriage contracts reveals that even the widows of petty bourgeois often did very well for themselves, thanks in part to the generosity of their spouses in providing for them in their wills. A great many of these fortunate widows were *rentières*, but several also continued to operate their husbands’ business.⁵³ Of course, poorer widows had no choice but to work if they wanted to be

49. Alain Bideau, “A Demographic and Social Analysis of Widowhood and Remarriage: The Example of the Castellany of Thoisy-en-Dombes, 1670-1840,” *Journal of Family History* 5, no. 1 (1980), 28.

50. *Ibid.*, 34.

51. Scarlett Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, *Être veuve sous l’Ancien Régime*, 147.

52. This conclusion contradicts certain “common sense” assumptions previously made by historians. For example, Ida Blom asserted that the nineteenth century marked an important “turning point” of sorts for widows in Western society, with longer life expectancies meaning that widows were less likely to be young women than had previously been the case. Ida Blom, “The History of Widowhood,” 197.

53. Scarlett Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, *Être veuve sous l’Ancien Régime*, 271. While marriage contracts may be a useful source for historians wanting to know more about French widows during the early modern period and the early nineteenth century, they become much less valuable by the advent of the Third Republic. Prior to that time, nearly 50% of newly married couples signed such a contract, but this swiftly decreased over the coming decades: by 1914, only 25% of couples followed suit, and less than 20% did so by 1930. The majority of individuals had apparently lost interest in having such documents written up; they had no real need of them since the different “regimes” that the couple could choose from only made a difference if a sizeable amount of wealth was involved. In light of such facts, it hardly seems worth the trouble to pore over hundreds or thousands of notarial documents and grapple with the diabolical complexities of the three different “regimes” available under the Code Civil. Pierre Arsac, “Le comportement juridique des individus d’après les contrats de mariage (Grenoble, 1886-1939),” *Revue d’Histoire Économique et Sociale* 51, no. 3 (1973): 386-388; Jean-Pierre Chaline, “Les contrats de mariage à Rouen au XIXe siècle; étude d’après l’enregistrement des actes civils publics,” *Revue d’Histoire*

able to feed themselves and their families. In Paris, such widows were prominent as peddlers, clothes-menders, and resellers of clothes and scrap, many of them having to work to an advanced age (we will see this pattern continue when we look at home workers at the beginning of the twentieth century).⁵⁴

Beauvalet recognized that such poor and “modest” widows were legion, but found it difficult to learn a great deal about the way they lived, or even how many of them there were. She considered it safe to assume that between one quarter and one third of all widows did not benefit from the growing wealth that was becoming available to other such women, and were forced to ask their families or institutions for help.⁵⁵ It is certain that widows represented an important part of women who received state assistance in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Paris,⁵⁶ where the *Grand Bureau des Pauvres* had the mandate to assist the poor at home and of admitting a certain number of them in hospitals. Widows seem to have been particularly interested in the latter option, and Beauvalet managed to gain some very interesting insight into the lives of poor widows by examining Parisian hospices that catered specifically to such women (and would continue to do so during the following centuries--see page 52).

Historians dealing with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are blessed with more abundant sources than their colleagues specializing in earlier eras, a fact that has allowed a few pioneers to begin studying widows of the working class. Looking at these poorer widows, scholars are more concerned with questions of simple material survival than with debates over agency and freedom. The information-gathering machinery of modern bureaucratic states, typified by census data, theoretically allows more rigorous statistical analyses of widows from all social strata and the financial problems facing them. Taking advantage of these opportunities, historians have made interesting preliminary studies, but these have not yet led to more comprehensive and wide-ranging overviews, no doubt partly because of the aforementioned difficulties. The material available on widows in the modern period makes for grim reading, and it is clear that such women were even more prone to living lives of poverty than their married counterparts. Such studies also suggest certain general patterns that seem to hold true for most poorer widows in modern Europe, including Third Republic France.

Économique et Sociale 48, no. 2 (1970): 245, 247.

54. Scarlett Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, *Être veuve sous l'Ancien Régime*, 281-282.

55. *Ibid.*, 268-269.

56. *Ibid.*, 312. Other interesting studies of widows in the medieval and Early Modern period include Robert J. Kalas, “The Noble Widow's Place in the Household: The Life and Career of Jeanne de Gontault,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 24, no. 3 (1993); and P. Renée Baernstein, “In Widow's Habit: Women Between Convent and Family in Sixteenth-Century Milan,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25, no. 5 (1994).

Olwen Hufton's work on single women, although dealing with the eighteenth century, is noteworthy since it highlights three themes that are frequently found in the study of working-class and peasant widows of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the problems with identifying widows in the historical records, the tendency of such women to cohabit with each other, and the great difficulty they had earning enough money to support themselves.⁵⁷

Hufton was not alone in finding it difficult to separate widows from single women in general. Writing about eighteenth and nineteenth-century Italy, Maura Palazzi admitted that the two groups may often have faced very different situations, but still lumped the two categories together when discussing female-headed households.⁵⁸ Likewise, an article by Deena J. Gonzalez on Spanish-American "widows" in nineteenth-century Santa Fe is indicative of the methodological difficulties inherent in such a study of widows. Because the census on which Gonzalez based much of her work did not enumerate widows separately, she was forced to place them in the broader category of divorced, separated and abandoned women.⁵⁹ Despite dealing with a different continent and century, Gonzalez was ultimately as incapable of discerning widows clearly in the historical record as Hufton was for eighteenth-century France.

Like Hufton, other historians have found that the employment opportunities for widows were very few and paid very badly. In an overview of widows in nineteenth and twentieth century Norway, Ida Blom found that most widows at least managed to avoid the stigma of poor relief and managed to earn a living despite the limited options that were available to them. In 1875, most widows in the coastal city of Bergen made a living by sewing, knitting, washing and providing general services in the homes of others. Hawking and trading (with bread, milk and millinery as the goods of choice) were also popular occupations among self-supporting widows. As always, these professions paid very poorly and offered little in the way of job security, often making it necessary for the widow to have more than one job.⁶⁰ Bettina Bradbury, who examined widowhood in a Canadian context, confirms the findings of the European studies. Looking at Montreal during the late nineteenth century, Bradbury found that working-class widows had little option but to take the worst-paid factory jobs or work in the casual and

57. Olwen Hufton, "Women Without Men: Widows and Spinsters in Britain and France in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Family History* 9, no. 4 (1984): 361-362. This tendency to keep daughters at home made it far more likely for these unlucky young women to remain spinsters for life.

58. Maura Palazzi, "Female Solitude and Patrilineage: Unmarried Women and Widows during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Journal of Family History* 15, no. 4 (1990): 444, 446.

59. Deena J. Gonzalez, "The Widowed Women of Santa Fe: Assessments on the Lives of an Unmarried Population, 1850-80," in Arlene Scadron, ed., *On Their Own: Widows and Widowhood in the American Southwest, 1849-1939* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 65-90.

60. Ida Blom, "Widowhood: From the Poor Law Society to the Welfare Society", 55-58, 60.

irregular domain of private service. Even work in a factory was not an option for many widows, since the long hours were incompatible with the demands of raising young children. According to census data, sewing outwork was the most popular profession among widows, with washerwoman coming in a close second: both professions were very poorly paid. Faced with such financial hardship, Montreal widows had to rely on the economic contribution of their children, who, according to Bradbury, often lived at home well into their adult years to help their mothers with their wages.⁶¹

This brings us to Hufton's third important finding, the tendency of widows and spinsters to cluster together. Lisa Wilson, in her overview of Pennsylvania widows during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, found that widowhood reinforced women's reliance on each other. Wilson claimed that living as a dependant in the house of a child or other relative was not so common as one might have thought, and that poor widows often shared dwellings with other single women instead.⁶² In a very interesting article on middle-class widows in Victorian England, Cynthia Curran also argued that such women were generally unable or unwilling to move in with relatives to economize.⁶³

In fact, historians have sometimes been able to analyse the residential patterns of widows in a broader sense and found that these women tended to move from the countryside to urban centres. Gisli Gunnlaugsson and Olaf Gardjarsdottir's work on turn-of-the-century Iceland is a fine example of the detailed statistical analysis of widowhood that is theoretically possible for the last two centuries or so. Of course, these scholars had the enormous advantage of dealing with a tiny country whose population was less than that of any one of Paris' *arrondissements* at the time. The authors hypothesized that it was easier for urban widows living in urban centres to remain independent thanks to the greater number of options open to them, a theory apparently borne out by data showing that the percentage of female heads of household was twice as high in urban areas as in rural ones. Fearing the loss of social status that would result from becoming

61. Bettina Bradbury, "Surviving as a Widow in Nineteenth-Century Montreal," *Urban History Review* 17, no. 3 (1989): 148-60.

62. Lisa Wilson, *Life After Death: Widows in Pennsylvania, 1750-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

63. Cynthia Curran, "Private Women, Public Needs: Middle-Class Widows in Victorian England," *Albion* 25, no. 2 (1993): 217-218, 221, 223. Curran's article is particularly interesting because it convincingly demonstrates that many middle-class widows were no better off than their working-class counterparts and did not enjoy the financial security that historians had once assumed. Such women had to seek work, but it was difficult for them to take such a drastic step, which clashed with the middle-class ideal of a life of leisure. Once a widow found the courage to enter the job market, she was usually appalled to discover that very few professions were open to her and that the pay would barely suffice to keep her alive. Many French war widows suffered a similar plight. *Ibid.*, 227-228, 231.

dependent, many widows appear to have migrated from the countryside to Iceland's few towns, where they could engage in wage labour or take in boarders if they required extra income. Furthermore, the urban environment made it possible to create and maintain efficient support networks comprised of family and friends.⁶⁴ These findings are extremely interesting, and census data suggests that younger French widows were also drawn to larger urban centres (see Appendix 2).

The place of war widows in recent historiography deserves special mention, if only because it is so negligible. This is particularly surprising since historians have thoroughly addressed the relationship between women and the Great War,⁶⁵ a conflict that has recently become a very fashionable subject in France. The 1990s and 2000s have witnessed the publication of a large variety of works dealing with the war, and there has been a growing interest in the home front and the aspects of the conflict that were not purely military or political.⁶⁶ However, war widows have hardly been mentioned by historians, and when they have it is usually in the context of a cultural history of mourning. This trend has been accentuated by the recent spate of works dealing with memory and the commemoration of the First World War, such as Daniel Sherman's *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France*. Sherman, like those writing before him, was only interested in war widows insofar as they were depicted as representations and metaphors in various works commemorating the war.⁶⁷

The current trend seems to involve a shift from the study of collective mourning towards a more personal approach, an enterprise that could theoretically yield much information about war widows, but which is fraught with difficulties. A recent French work on the First World War, while taking its cue from earlier books on commemoration, insists that it is necessary to go further and to study the individual mourning that followed the war, such as that of widows. The

64. Gisli Gunnlaugsson and Olaf Gardjarsdottir, "Transition Into Widowhood: A Life-Course Perspective on the Household Positions of Icelandic Widows at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century," *Continuity and Change* 11, no. 3 (1996): 435-58.

65. Contemporaries saw the war as a watershed for women's emancipation, but historians have been quick to point out that all this was quite untrue. James McMillan convincingly argued as far back as the 1981 that the First World War had had little effect on French women. James F. McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot: The Place of Women in French Society 1870-1940* (New York: St-Martin's Press, 1981), 4-5. Historians are now more interested in asking why contemporaries believed these fictions and what they reveal about gender relations and other national preoccupations at the time. See for example Mary-Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes*, and Margaret H. Darrow, *French Women and the First World War: War Stories of the Home Front* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

66. For an overview of the historiography of the Great War, including current trends, see Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

67. Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

authors, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, firmly believe that historians can track down and describe the phenomenon of grief, despite the obvious challenges; with enough patience, “tales of mourning” can be reconstituted, as can the lives and sufferings of those behind them. The authors certainly do reveal the social isolation and sense of strangeness that many war widows must have experienced during the first few months following the death of their husbands, an aspect of widowhood that is not intuitively obvious. However, the first-person testimonies on which such a work is based were produced only by members of a very limited stratum of society and do little to illumine the way that the greater part of French war widows lived through the same experience.⁶⁸ Interesting as such an approach might be, it ultimately tells us little about the majority of war widows.

The historiography of widowhood, while not insignificant, still represents a field where there is much room for further exploration, particularly as far as the last two centuries are concerned. The material available makes it clear that the historian attempting to shed light on the lives of widows in any given country will face serious challenges and may have to be content with a somewhat impressionistic and rough outline. The result will often be less well fleshed-out than one might hope, and it may only provide an imperfect description of the daily challenges faced by widows. The literature also makes it clear that widowhood, as one would expect, made life much more difficult for the vast majority of women from the peasantry and working classes, and that it was often impossible for them to shield themselves and their children from poverty.

The preceding discussion reveals the difficulties facing the historian who wishes to write about widows. These women imperceptibly blend in with others of their sex, whether married or single, and separating the wheat from the chaff is frequently all but impossible. Much of the information available is of a fragmentary and impressionistic nature, and can only hint at the reality faced by most widows.⁶⁹ The researcher is often constrained by what the archives turn up in terms of documents devoted solely to widows, and such evidence must of necessity provide a somewhat skewed sample. For example, in the following chapters the vast majority of the

68. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18, Retrouver la Grande Guerre*, 175, 178. A recent article by Stéphanie Petit demonstrates this problem: her three testimonies are interesting, but at least two of them are provided by members of the wealthy elite. Stéphanie Petit, “Le deuil des veuves de la Grande Guerre: un deuil spécifique?” *Guerres Mondiales et Conflicts Contemporains* 50, no. 198 (2000): 53-65.

69. For an attempt at resolving these difficulties for an earlier period (and a different country), see Anne E.C. McCants, “The Not-So-Merry Widows of Amsterdam, 1740-1782,” *Journal of Family History* 24, no. 4 (1999): 441-67. McCants’ research provides a few tantalizing hints, but ultimately falls short of allowing her to paint a complete portrait of the situation.

documentation dealing with pensions and mutual aid societies in the national and departmental archives deals only with civil servants and government employees, while revealing precious little about similar measures in the private sector. Even more unfortunate is the fact that the sources often only allow for a “top-down” view of the situation focussing on (male) policy-makers and enforcers, and the official publications of various organizations and associations.

My sources are skewed in another way that will be familiar to any student of French history. I found myself essentially limited to the material that I could find in Parisian libraries and archives, and these do not allow for a truly national overview of the situation. When it comes to charities and widows’ associations, I generalize about the “provinces” and the rural countryside based on a limited number of publications from a few departments. Paris is of course over-represented in such sources, but I came across very few items dealing with other large cities (the Catholic Union of War Widows was based in Lyon, but one would be hard-pressed to realize it). Such limitations must be kept in mind when reading what follows.

1: WIDOWS IN FRANCE: THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

Widows rarely attracted the attention of philanthropists and social reformers in Third Republic France prior to the Great War, and there was little discussion about the fate of these women, which was apparently not deemed worthy of any particular attention. In 1909, the *Société internationale pour l'étude des questions d'assistance* heard a report by Émile Cheysson, a major figure in the French temperance movement and an “inveterate reformer” associated with numerous philanthropic causes,¹ who passionately argued that more should be done to assist working-class widows. Cheysson boldly asserted that widows were more worthy of pity than the elderly, who at least had the advantage of knowing the difficulties that lay in wait for them and were able to prepare accordingly. In stark contrast, “the young widow (it is she who is the most worthy of help) is struck at random by a thunderbolt, cruelly betrayed by fate.”² Cheysson had become aware of the need to help poor widows over a decade before. After the assassination of President Sadi Carnot by an Italian anarchist in 1894, a huge public subscription had collected an impressive amount of money for his widow. She in turn had decided to give the money to widows less fortunate than herself, setting up a fund to provide nine hundred annual pensions worth two hundred francs each. Cheysson, who had been a member of the commission charged with assigning these pensions, remembered the task as having been a veritable calvary. Despite the fact that the charity had not been well-known, the commission had been flooded with requests that revealed a world of poverty and misery.³

What, Cheysson asked, could be done to help these women and their children?⁴ It seemed to him that widows should have held pride of place in the various associations devoted to mutual assistance and foresight (*prévoyance*). However, he claimed that this was not the case since most of these organizations concerned themselves almost exclusively with the elderly, most of whom had children who should have been taking care of them. Insurance schemes struck Cheysson as being an ideal solution, and he claimed that one only had to look across the Channel to see how popular these were with the Anglo-Saxons. However, this concept had not

1. Cheysson, a social scientist, was among other things one of the founders of the pro-natalist *Alliance nationale pour l'accroissement de la population française* in 1896. Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence and the Origins of the Welfare State*, 60.

2. “Bulletin de la Société internationale pour l'étude des questions d'assistance: Travaux des assemblées générales, séance du 27 octobre 1909,” *Revue philanthropique* XXVI (1909), 84-85.

3. *Ibid.*, 87.

4. Cheysson argued from the very beginning that it was of primordial importance to take care of the orphaned children “who will later become the soldiers and the producers that the country needs,” suggesting that the real objects of his solicitude were the (male) children left behind by the dead father, and not his widow.

yet caught on in France: a National Life Insurance Fund had existed since the Second Empire, but it was not at all popular. Since private initiatives were so inadequate, Cheysson continued, it seemed reasonable that the state would concern itself with widows and orphans. But this was obviously not the case, since there was no form of assistance intended for these most deserving of poor people. Certainly, widows and orphans benefited, as did other impoverished individuals who depended on charity, from the 1893 law providing free medical care and the 1905 law providing “welfare” payments to the elderly (seventy years and older), but that was all. Cheysson pointed out that very few widows were able to enjoy the benefits of their husbands’ pensions: more often than not, it was necessary for the husband to have already retired and claimed the pension for himself before it could “devolve” to his widow, albeit in a diluted form. Obviously, this was of no help whatsoever to young widows burdened with children. Cheysson bitterly joked that Indians perhaps had the right idea when they burned their widows on the pyre so that they would not have to worry about providing for them.⁵

Cheysson proposed concrete reforms to help widows. However, he was first careful to argue that it was necessary to differentiate between young widows and older ones, the difficulties of the latter ones being much less onerous since they only had themselves to worry about. Cheysson claimed that as far as these old widows were concerned, it was enough to make sure that their husbands’ pensions would revert to them (a solution that ignored the small detail that the majority of Frenchmen did not enjoy any sort of pension). For the younger and more vulnerable widows, he concluded that the only practical solution involved life insurance policies. Such women needed money immediately in order to raise their children, and the best way of doing this might be by starting a business, which required a little capital.⁶ None of the vague

5. *Revue philanthropique* XXVI, 85-89.

6. *Ibid.*, 91. In hindsight, life insurance policies (at least in the private sector) are hardly an ideal solution; court records suggest that it was not uncommon for insurance companies to refuse to pay up, claiming that the husband’s death was not covered by the policy or that the widow had invalidated the policy by failing to follow proper procedures when filing a claim. For example, Mr. Duez was bitten by a marten on 5 June 1897 and died twenty days later. The “Providence” life insurance company refused to pay the widow the indemnity of forty thousand francs due in case of death, arguing that Duez and his wife had failed to provide notification of the accident during the eight days following the incident as required by the policy. The widow decided to take the case to court and was vindicated when the judge refuted the company’s argument, stating that the illness brought about by the bite counted as *force majeure*. Relying on the legal system to receive compensation for a husband’s death was not an option that was open to every widow, since it required time, money and a certain knowledge of legal matters. One can only wonder how many women went without an indemnity payment because they failed to jump through the necessary bureaucratic hoops while still in shock. AP, D1U9-425, Cour d’appel de Paris, Arrêts civils, 2 February 1900.

ideas put forth by Cheysson came to fruition.⁷

Cheysson's presentation is an ideal introduction to this chapter, highlighting as it does the failures of French institutions, whether public or private, to adequately help impoverished widows and suggesting the difficulties faced by these women. We will begin by examining the issue of widows and work. It was usually necessary for widows from the working class and peasantry to seek employment if they wanted to keep themselves and their children alive. Unfortunately for them, the vast majority of work available to women at the time paid very poorly, and the occupations in which widows clustered were some of the most unprofitable of all. A brief look at widowed out-workers in the Parisian flower-making trades will reveal the harsh working conditions faced by these women, as well as their frequently appalling living conditions.

Next, we will see that the widows of government employees who received pensions were certainly more fortunate than their counterparts whose husbands did not enjoy such benefits, but that the amount of money that devolved to them was usually derisory. As Cheysson pointed out, the greatest problem with pensions was that they were worthless for those widows, usually younger ones, whose husbands had not yet become entitled to retirement benefits.

We will then look at mutual aid societies. These were quite popular in Third Republic France, and the evidence suggests that, contrary to what Cheysson claimed, many of them included provisions for assisting the widows of deceased members, while some actually existed for that sole purpose. However, because of the low salaries of most members and the small size of many of these organizations, the benefits that accrued to widows were once again extremely modest. Furthermore, many of these societies were also dependent on the contributions of non-participating members to remain viable, and therefore had a charitable aspect about them.

Finally, we will consider the fate of old widows. Examining publically administered hospices in Paris, an interesting combination of state welfare and self-help, will reveal that the condition of old people and widows in these institutions was ambiguous. Although provided with decent food and shelter, the residents were nevertheless the subjects of impersonal institutional care, and the environment in which they ended their days could leave a great deal to be desired. Once they walked into the institution, they might be facing long years of tedium and

7. Following Cheysson's report, one member of the philanthropic association pointed out that the Assistance Publique in Paris did provide some limited assistance to widows who had very young children as long as they were breast-feeding (these measures also applied to divorced and teenaged mothers). Another member replied that this was no solution at all: "You give twenty-five francs to a widow so that she can raise her child, but I'm telling you that it's not with twenty-five francs that the widow...can live. She therefore has to work, and in order to work she eventually has to arrange for her child to have a wet-nurse. But as soon as she does that, she loses the money from the Assistance Publique." *Revue philanthropique* XXVI, 96.

continued labour.⁸

The information available therefore confirms what one would suspect (and what the limited literature available on widows in the modern period suggests), namely that widows led extremely difficult lives. Their coping strategies often involved scraping together money from a variety of sources in order to be able to merely subsist. Third Republic France was slowly beginning to transform itself into a welfare state, and several widows already relied on a little extra money from the Assistance Publique to make ends meet. Nevertheless, the government did not or could not do a great deal to help some of its most unfortunate citizens, and individuals therefore tried to help themselves as best they could. It is against this grim antecedent that the pensions and allocations for widows who lost their husbands on the battlefield of the Great War will have to be judged.

Widows' Work

The ominous generalizations of scholars (see page 12) about the poorly remunerated work available to women are confirmed by contemporary French studies of the *belle époque*, and the numbers are striking. According to the *Conseil des Prud'hommes*, a labour relations board, the average Parisian male printer earned 7.2 francs a day in 1911, while his female counterpart only earned four. Women in typically female sectors of the economy earned even less: dressmakers made 3.5 francs a day, while laundry women made three.⁹ In light of such widespread discrimination and its apparent success in relegating women to low-paying jobs, it seems almost impossible for working-class widows to have been able to earn a living. Indeed, many French widows were forced to rely on the derisory profits of homework.

This type of production was extremely widespread in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to historian Judith Coffin, technical innovation often facilitated the spread of home rather than factory work, contrary to what an overly simplistic model of industrialization might suggest. Industrialists were quite happy to exploit this pool of cheap labour, especially when such an arrangement made it possible to bypass irksome protective labour laws. Thus, the invention of the sewing machine encouraged decentralized production in

8. It must be noted that there was nothing particularly exceptional about such a fate. During the decades prior to the Great War it was common for many women from lower down the social scale to continue working well into their sixties and seventies. Lynn Abrams, *The Making of Modern Woman* (London: Longman, 2002), 96.

9. Statistique générale de France, *Salaires et coût de l'existence* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1911), 21-3. In all cases, provincial counterparts earned considerably less, although this was offset by the lower cost of living.

the garment-making industry, where factory production and homework usually coexisted peacefully and sometimes even became complementary, with the “unskilled” home workers finishing up factory-made garments by sewing on buttons, finishing hems, etc. By the turn of the century, especially in the textile trades, homework had come to be seen as “women’s work” by definition; labour of this sort was deemed unskilled, justifying the low pay which was rarely considered a problem since women were supposed to have a husband to look after them.¹⁰

The 1906 French census reveals that a disproportionate number of widows, particularly those over forty years of age, were classified as “isolated workers,” an ill-defined, catch-all category that included homework of various sorts. While most of these women were found in the agricultural sector, reflecting the rural nature of the country, many of them were in industry, particularly fabric and textile work.¹¹ The fate of women in the countryside, whether married or widowed, seems to have been of little interest to society at large, but there was growing concern about women working in towns and cities, and this led to numerous investigations that allow the historian to catch a glimpse of working widows’ lives.¹²

In 1913, the Direction du Travail published the results of an extensive investigation on the home-based flower-making industry conducted over a period of two years between 1908 and 1910.¹³ Artificial flower-making was generally a small-scale industry, but one that was by no

10. Judith Coffin, *The Politics of Women’s Work: The Paris Garment Trades 1750-1915* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 123-124, 127, 131.

11. Out of 840,000 female “isolated workers” in the fabric-related trades, 114,000 of them were widows, while in the textile industry, widows accounted for 20,000 of the nation’s 117,000 isolated female workers. Statistique générale de France, *Résultats statistique du recensement général de la population effectué le 4 mars 1906, Tome I, Troisième partie—État civil de la population active* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1908-1911), 175. Widows were also over-represented among American homeworkers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Eileen Boris has found that these women, like their French counterparts, needed other sources of income such as charity or children’s earnings to survive. Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11, 178.

12. The inquiry in question was a product of what Judith Coffin referred to as the “staggering” amount of attention that was being paid to women’s homework in Europe and North America at the turn of the century. In France, this attention was not the result of concern for the women themselves, but was rather motivated by worries over national decline in an age of economic recession (1880s and 90s), falling birth rates, and deteriorating international relations. Judith Coffin, *The Politics of Women’s Work*, 173, 202.

13. It is of course impossible for a French historian to examine an inquiry (enquête) of this kind without thinking of Joan Scott’s analysis of a government investigation on Parisian labour from the mid-nineteenth century. Scott showed how the supposedly scientific and objective inquiry was in fact ideologically motivated and how the authors abused statistics to promote social harmony, make value judgements and reinforce gender roles in both a literal and symbolic sense. According to Scott, historians have continued to use the information contained in such documents without questioning its categorization or wondering about its original purpose and context, thereby perpetuating its slanted representation of reality. See Chapter 6 of Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). While the flower-making investigation in question was perhaps motivated by hidden ideological agendas, there is little

means insignificant, with exports worth about twenty million francs in 1910. Nearly twenty-four thousand people worked in the artificial flower industry in France, the vast majority of them women, and nearly half of them “isolated” (home) workers. Over four hundred women were questioned, including 321 workers, sixty contractors and thirty-five employers, and the investigators paid special attention to Paris, the traditional centre of this industry. Relatively few of the employers and contractors were widows, but fully 20% of the 208 Parisian workers were.¹⁴

As one might expect, the investigators found that the wages paid to home-based flower-makers were nothing short of derisory. Among rose-makers, a highly specialized sub-category of flower-makers, a few women made four to five francs a day, but this was exceptional, and as many as a third of these *rosières* made only one to two francs per day. The situation was far worse as far as the less-specialized workers were concerned, with a quarter of the small flower-workers interviewed earning a maximum of one franc per day, while fully a third of them were simply unable to support themselves and were drawing aid from l'Assistance Publique. Among Parisian flower-makers as a whole, 49% earned two francs a day or less, and this was during the high season, at which time some of them they often worked more than twelve hours a day to earn their meagre income. The high season past, however, many of these women found themselves completely without work for several months.¹⁵ To place the money earned by these women in perspective, one only needs to know that in 1910 a kilogram of bread cost approximately forty centimes and a litre of milk thirty-five centimes, while a kilogram of beefsteak cost over two francs.¹⁶ If a woman earned as little as a franc per day, and assuming that she worked six days a week, she could obviously do little more than feed herself.

The investigation found that there was often very little difference between the small-scale contractors and the workers that they hired. This was certainly the case with Mrs. S., a 65-year-old widow, who had learned the trade from her daughter and had been making flowers for twelve years or so. She normally worked with two other old women who received financial assistance from the Assistance Publique like herself. According to the investigators, Mrs. S. and

reason to believe that the working and living conditions depicted therein are false or misleading, particularly since these are so grim that they do not reflect well on French industry or society.

14. France. Direction du travail, *Enquête sur le travail à domicile dans l'industrie de la fleur artificielle* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1913), 15-17, 103, 232, 330..

15. Ibid., vi-ix. In spite of this, the government inspectors were confident that most Parisian flower-makers did not have other jobs during the slow season (typically June, July and August).

16. Remy Allaseur, Jacqueline Fourastie and Jean Guilhem, *Documents pour l'élaboration d'indices du coût de la vie en France de 1910 à 1965* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1970), 28, 71-71, 85-86.

her two employees were dressed equally shabbily and treated each other in a very egalitarian fashion while answering questions. The contractor, thanks to her own work and that of her employees, made a gross daily profit of 1.5 francs, which of course did not take into account the money she had to spend to buy supplies. The length of the average working day was between ten and twelve hours, and the investigators believed that these old women would have worked longer if they had been able to. The miserable little workshop did not have any flower-making business for three or four months out of the year (a common situation), and the women then turned their efforts to feather-mounting, for which Mrs. S. earned only a franc a day at the most. The investigators determined that Mrs. S. earned perhaps 263 francs a year, and estimated that she received a further 180 francs from the Assistance Publique. Mrs. S., who had been living alone since her daughter had married and who occupied a tiny two-room apartment in the working-class neighbourhood of Belleville, stated that “we earn too much to die, but too little to live.”¹⁷

In comparison, Mrs. B., another widow and small-scale contractor, lived in luxury. She, along with her daughter and an apprentice, worked for a large rose manufacturer that had been providing her with work for over a decade. She and her “staff” had work nearly year-round, although there were periods of unemployment and sickness. Mrs. B. and her two employees worked on average ten hours a day, although she herself sometimes worked well into the night when it was necessary. The little enterprise earned about ten francs a day, which meant that yearly profits averaged 2,500 francs, although one had to deduct the apprentice’s salary and the cost of supplies. Mrs. B. and her daughter declared themselves satisfied with their jobs in general, feeling that they had to work long and hard but earned a decent living. Like Mrs. S., Mrs. B. and her daughter lived in Belleville, but paid twice as much per year in rent and therefore had somewhat more bearable living quarters.¹⁸

The flower-makers interviewed were rarely so well off as Mrs. B., however. Mrs. S. was a young woman who had lost her husband only two years before and had suddenly found herself alone with five small children, having no other financial resources than what she could earn by making artificial flowers. Her youngest son, an infant, had been sickly since birth and had recently died, while another of her children had had diphtheria three months before, at the same time that a third one had been ravaged by an unknown illness. Mrs. S. herself suffered from tuberculosis, and when she had to press down on her iron to smooth out the flowers, the pressure

17. France. Direction du travail, *Enquête sur le travail*, 94-95.

18. *Ibid.*, 82-83.

of the instrument against her chest often made her vomit blood. Because of her children, Mrs. S. could not stray far from her home, which meant that she could not work for the large enterprises that had once employed her, and she took whatever work local contractors offered. Because of the poor health of her children and her illness, she was only able to work on a very irregular basis. During the winter of 1907-1908, she had made artificial chrysanthemums, which provided her with an income of about fifteen francs a week but this sort of work had quickly proved to be too much for her, and she had switched to a less remunerative specialty. When the investigation was conducted in June, Mrs. S. was unemployed. The investigators determined that her yearly budget came out to about 550 francs a year, although this was only thanks to a significant amount of money from the Assistance Publique.¹⁹

Mrs. M. was eighty-two years old, “a little old lady, very clean, and very deaf, with whom it is impossible to communicate except by writing: she speaks only with great difficulty since she suffered a stroke two years ago that left her with a few infirmities.” She had been a flower-maker for sixty-nine years, and had been working from home for thirty-eight of them. She knew how to make all sorts of artificial flowers, having learned her trade at a time when narrow specialization had been unknown, but her elderly condition meant that she only had the strength to make *petites fleurs*, the least profitable kind. Not surprisingly, she was unable to work on a regular basis, and the investigators estimated that she had only put in only about 150 days during the preceding year, which would have produced an income of just over sixty-seven francs. Mrs. M. received an old-age pension from the Assistance Publique, but since her rent was relatively high (all of two hundred francs), she had to supplement the pension somehow. It was impossible for her to find cheaper lodgings in her neighbourhood, which she was unwilling to leave, having lived there for many years.²⁰

The case of Mrs. B. is particularly interesting, since the investigators chose to carefully detail how she spent her meagre income, providing insight into how such poor working women lived in Paris at the turn of the century. A sixty-year-old widow, Mrs. B. had learned her trade as an apprentice when still very young, but had given it up after marrying an employee of the Crédit Lyonnais. However, she had returned to the profession after her husband had died over twenty years ago, leaving her without any resources, and she now earned her living as best she could by making little flowers that were used as ornaments on evening gowns. Suffering from tuberculosis and ulcers, already old and not very skilful, she was barely able to earn more than a

19. Ibid., 147-148.

20. Ibid., 193-194.

single franc a day, although she was assured of work most of the year. Mrs. B., who received ten francs a month from the Assistance Publique, lived in a tiny room (fifteen to eighteen cubic metres) on the sixth floor of an apartment building. Her yearly expenses were as follows:

- Bread: 0.15 francs per day; 54.75 francs per year
- Milk: 0.10 francs per day; 36.50 francs per year
- Coffee: 1 franc per month; 12 francs per year
- Sugar, 1 kilogram per month; 8.40 francs per year
- Vegetables (normally potatoes): 0.10 francs per day; 36.50 francs per year
- Cheese or eggs: 0.10 francs per day; 36.50 francs per year
- Butter: 0.40 francs per week; 20.80 francs per year
- Soap and washing crystals: 1 franc per month; 12 francs per year
- Lamp oil: 3 litres per week; 30 francs per year
- Rent: 170 francs a year

Mrs. B never drank any wine and almost never ate any meat, although she occasionally splurged by replacing the daily soup that was her dietary staple with a small mutton chop worth about twenty centimes. As far as clothing went, she kept wearing the same old dresses and mending those that were sometimes given to her. For the last five years, she had been wearing used socks she had received as a gift, although she had been obliged to sew new heels onto some of them. Mrs. B also tried to heat her little room as little as possible to save on heating.²¹

Things were no better outside Paris. Mrs. R, a sixty-eight-year-old widow living in Lyon, was in a sense fortunate in having employment all year long, but had to work for twelve to fifteen hours a day, never going to bed before midnight and eating little more than a thin soup early in the morning. The investigators felt that it was safe to say that Mrs. R. “does not earn enough to live on.” Specializing in the manufacture of little white flowers that were used for communion wreaths, Mrs. R.’s income had fluctuated over the last four years, but had averaged just a little over four hundred francs, although about thirty francs had to be deducted from this to pay for supplies. By the time she had paid her rent, her food and her taxes (!), there was nothing left. She had no other resources aside from her work; her husband had worked for the railroad, but not long enough to allow her to draw a pension. The investigator reported that Mrs. R. complained about her lot in life, but without any real bitterness.²²

These depressing accounts suggest the limited work options available for women in general and widows in particular at the turn of the previous century. The flower-makers made it clear that they were doing this type of work because they had no other option: in certain cases, they were obliged to stay at home for a variety of reasons, but they often seem to have simply

21. Ibid., 204-205.

22. Ibid., 347-349.

been unable to find better-paying work.²³ The accounts also reveal the great poverty in which many of these widowed women lived and the heroic efforts that were necessary to stay alive, efforts that would often have been in vain if they had not been complemented by a few francs from the Assistance Publique.²⁴

Pensions

In contrast to the flower-makers, the widows of civil servants and government employees were fortunate in that they could expect to receive regular payments from the state for the rest of their lives. However, aside from the upper echelons of the bureaucracy, these payments were often minuscule, representing a fraction of the often paltry salary that the deceased husband had drawn. Furthermore, as Émile Cheysson so rightly pointed out, only older widows whose husbands had been entitled to a retirement pension received anything, while the others simply had to make do without any help from the state, much like a Mrs. B. or S.²⁵

Traditionally, the widows most likely to benefit from the largesse of the French state were the ones who needed it the least. This had certainly been true during the Second Empire, when a small coterie of elite civil servants, generals and assorted hangers-on knew that the

23. It would seem logical to assume that widows, having so few options open to them in the labour market, turned to prostitution more often than other women. Under the Third Republic, most licensed street walkers (*filles soumises*) were young women between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, the vast majority of them single. Older women and widows were almost certainly more common among unregistered prostitutes, an ill-defined group that included a large number of women from various backgrounds who only occasionally resorted to such means to earn additional income. Older widows appear to have played a prominent role in the sex trade of the Third Republic, and it was particularly likely for unregistered brothels (*maisons de rendez-vous*) to be managed by a widow or separated wife. Of course, the very nature of unregistered prostitution makes it impossible to estimate the number of people involved and the prevalence of widows among them. Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France After 1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 42, 44, 145, 177, 181.

24. To conclude their report, the investigators claimed that their most important findings were that the home workers received very low wages despite putting in extremely long hours, and that unemployment was a constant threat. The inspectors regretted the fact that it was impossible to restrict these women's working hours since the law of 1892 did not apply to home work. France. Direction du travail, *Enquête sur le travail*, x.

25. Furthermore, a pension could create unexpected difficulties for the widow of a civil servant, since it made her ineligible for charitable assistance. The Direction du Travail conducted a second inquiry of home-workers during the 1900s, this time concentrating on the clothes-making industry. A few of the women interviewed had pensions because their husbands had been government employees, but they nevertheless had to work until an advanced age to support themselves. Mrs. X's husband had been a police officer and she therefore received a widow's pension of two hundred francs per year. Nevertheless, she put in fifteen or sixteen hour days when she could get the work and still lived in dire poverty. The irony was that she could not hope for any sort of assistance or charity, whether public or private, because of the pensions she was drawing. France. Direction du Travail, *Enquête sur le travail à domicile dans l'industrie de la lingerie. Tome I: Paris* (Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1907), 693-694.

government would provide their widows with a comfortable existence should anything happen to them. The lamentations and pleas of these women, along with the money that these earned them, make an ironic counterpoint to the grinding poverty of the widowed flower-makers and to the less favoured recipients of government pensions described below.

An Imperial decree of 27 January 1869 awarded Mrs. Ohier a pension of five thousand francs a year. The forty-year-old widow had gotten married only seven years before to a colonel. After having repaid her deceased husband's debts, she had found herself with less than twenty thousand francs, from which she had to pay for the funeral: although the cost of this was unspecified, it was of necessity extremely high, since appearances had to be kept up. Mrs. Ohier wrote directly to the Emperor, pleading her case by claiming that she had no money, but that she had been a good wife and now needed to be a good mother: "a cruel accident, the loss of my husband, has left me with three young daughters to raise but without a fortune. My situation is made even more frightful by my failing health, which was seriously weakened by the strain of the several months that I spent taking care of my dying husband." Mrs. Ohier was already drawing a widow's pension of eight hundred francs a year, but this was clearly not enough for a woman of her station.²⁶

The case of Mrs. the Duchess Decaze, a sixty-year-old widow whose husband had belonged to the *Chambre des pairs* and had been awarded the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour, was particularly appalling. Upon her husband's death in 1861, she wrote to the Emperor to plead her case, explaining that her "only" resources were eighty thousand francs that she had inherited from her father and which paid her 4% interest annually (a very reasonable 3,200 francs), fifty-six shares in the Eastern Railway (guaranteed by the state, of course), fifteen thousand francs' worth of various other stocks, and a property in Charente-Inférieure worth two-hundred thousand francs which she was in the process of selling. The Ministry agreed that the poor Duchess did indeed find herself in a "precarious situation" and granted her a six-thousand franc pension.²⁷

26. AN F⁷⁰ 637/1856, "État des pensions accordées en vertu de la loi du 17 juillet 1856; Mme. Ohier."

27. Ibid., "Mme. la duchesse Decaze." The Imperial administration did sometimes turn down such applicants. In 1860, the Baroness of Rottenbourg, widow of a divisional general, wrote to the Emperor asking for an exceptional pension, explaining that she needed to keep up appearances:

The great commands held by my deceased husband for many years...the high responsibilities that were vested in him, always forced us to make financial sacrifices that were, frankly, above our means, and made me develop the habit of a certain way of life, which it would cost me nothing to give up, if only I did not want to fall too far from the rank that I occupied while my husband still lived...

The bureaucrats were unmoved and the baroness received nothing. Ibid., "Mme. La baronesse de Rottenbourg."

Surprisingly, the Third Republic was apparently every bit as generous as the Second Empire towards widows of a certain social status who needed to “keep up appearances,” at least during the early years of the new regime. This is demonstrated by Mrs. Aupick, who was nearly eighty when her husband died in 1872, leaving her with only a house in Calvados that provided her with eighty-five francs a month in revenues, furniture worth twenty thousand francs; and lifetime use of a 4.5% bond that provided her with an annual income of 1,854 francs. The government granted Aupick a pension worth six thousand francs a year.²⁸

The newly-founded Republic was much less generous when it came to the rank and file of the civil service’s various branches. In general, the widow of a government employee could only receive some form of compensation for her husband’s death if he had been entitled to an old age pension, which would devolve to her at a greatly reduced rate at the time of his death (usually only one third of the old age pension). The majority of civil servants, especially low-ranking ones, only became eligible for such a retirement pension after reaching the age of sixty and having been employed for thirty years (although this included military service).²⁹

Henri Raoul Bardel died in 1905 while only fifty-two years old, leaving behind a childless widow of the same age. The couple had married in 1877, at which time Bardel had been in the army and his bride working as a dressmaker. Two years later, Bardel had gone to work in the civil service, earning 1,800 francs a year as a fifth-class clerk: he steadily worked his way up the ranks and by the time of his death was a first-class clerk, earning 4,500 francs a year. Having been in the service for twenty-seven years (including military service), Bardel was entitled to a pension of two thousand francs, a third of which legally reverted to his widow. This meant that Mrs. Bardel had to make do with about one-third the income that her husband had brought home when he had started his career twenty-five years before, and it is safe to assume that this entailed a considerably reduced standard of living.³⁰

The tiny pension that eventually devolved to a civil servant’s widow could be reduced even further if the deceased husband had children. Jules André Boquillon, a former prison warden, died in 1899, leaving behind his forty-four-year-old widow and a daughter from a first marriage. The daughter lived with her paternal grand-father, who had been appointed her legal tutor, and she was entitled to 25% of her step-mother’s pension. The widow therefore had to make do with a pension of only 170 francs a year, although it increased to the full 226 francs

28. Ibid., “Mme. Aupick.”

29. André Mouchet, *Des Droits que la loi accorde aux veuves. Thèse pour le doctorat* (Paris: A. Pedone, 1897) 60.

30. AN, F⁴ 2847, “Veuves de fonctionnaires A-B: M. Henri Raoul Bardel.”

once her step-daughter reached the age of majority.³¹

For a widow whose husband had not reached retirement age, there was little hope of a pension. However, widows of civil servants who died while performing their duty or whose deaths were somehow deemed to be the result of their jobs were also eligible for pensions. A survey of pension files available at the Archives Nationales covering the Second Empire and the early years of the Third Republic suggests that a certain number of women attempted to obtain a pension in this fashion, regardless of how unlikely their claims may have been. David Fontang had not served the state long enough for his widow to be awarded a regular pension when he died in 1870. However, in 1863 he had been stationed in Algeria and explored a forest in order to determine whether it was suitable for exploitation. The severe heat had given him a violent headache and the party had been forced to turn back for fear that Fontang would die. A doctor later certified that this trauma was directly responsible for his death, and his widow was therefore awarded a so-called exceptional pension. Mr. Davout, another forest warden serving in Algeria, had only put in twenty-seven years by the time of his death, which meant that his widow would not normally have received a pension. However, it was determined that his death had been the result of serious exhaustion that he had suffered during an insurrection in 1865; his health, already bad due to the African climate, had supposedly steadily deteriorated after that.³²

Widows were not always so lucky when trying to prove that their husbands had died as a result of their employment. In 1877, Widow Comprette argued that her recently deceased husband, a forest warden, had suffered from a heart condition which had been aggravated by his duties and his military service in Lorraine during the Franco-Prussian war. Furthermore, the widow claimed that the damp climate in the forest of Crecy where he had worked for many years had only made things worse. Medical certificates to this effect were included with Comprette's letter, but the widow and her two young girls were denied any sort of assistance.³³

While most civil servants who were drawing a retirement pension when they died had wives of roughly the same age who were no longer burdened with children, this was by no means always the case. Jeanne Baillet had become a widow in 1862 at the age of thirty-two when her husband, another forest warden, passed away. Fifteen years later, not knowing to whom to turn for assistance, she naively wrote to the President of the Republic's wife to see about

31. Ibid., "M. Jules André Boquillon."

32. AN, F¹⁰1569, "Ministère des Finances. Direction générale des forêts," files 58 (David Fontang) and 67 (M. Davout). It was surely no coincidence that Davout's superiors had been impressed by his "very commendable activity and devotion" during the events of 1865, and this must have weighed heavily in favour of providing his widow with a pension.

33. Ibid., file 22.

“reactivating” a widow’s pension that had apparently fallen into administrative limbo:

Having been aware for many years of your generous devotion towards all those who are unfortunate, I write to beseech you with my humble words, to implore your kind heart, to beg you to have mercy on a poor woman who was made a widow when still young and burdened with three children of a young age. Alas, misfortune has always been my lot! My husband...died only six months before reaching retirement age. He died while performing his duty, and because of this I was given a tiny pension that was insufficient for my needs....

The key point of this tear-jerking letter was that widow Baillet had mislaid her pension title and, not realizing that she could ask for another, did not collect her pension for four years.

Annotations on the letter show that the first bureaucrat to have looked at it in the Ministry of Finance was quite sceptical about such a story, but a senior official in the Forestry service conducted an investigation and found that Baillet was almost completely without resources except for the measly seventy-five centimes per day that she earned when her fragile health permitted her to work. The bureaucrats decided that she was “of very good mores and deserving in all respects of the administration’s goodwill,” and gave her a new title, along with a one-time payment of one hundred francs to help alleviate her immediate misery.³⁴ This case is interesting because it reveals that bureaucrats were sometimes willing to show sympathy but judged a widow’s worthiness on moral grounds as much as legal ones. Unfortunately, the lack of details in most case files do not allow us to determine how common this sort of behaviour may have been.

Various other technical details of the pension regulations could make widows ineligible for pensions upon their husbands’ deaths. In 1873, seventy-year-old Catherine Brue, the widow of a fishing warden, wrote to the administration, practically begging for some sort of assistance or pension. She had married in 1852 and her husband had died only four years later, but the law stipulated that a wife needed to have been married for at least six years before she earned the right to a pension. Brue explained that she was basically indigent and incapable of once again working as a dress-maker thanks to multiple infirmities. Illiterate, she had someone write the letter for her, and pathetically mentioned that her husband had served in Napoleon’s Spanish campaign. The bureaucrat dealing with this case was less lenient than his colleague, and granted her nothing.³⁵

The pensions provided to widows of civil servants varied significantly depending on the

34. Ibid., file no. 18. Such a file is a rare find, as most contain nothing more than a few forms and letters that reveal very little about the deceased husband or his widow.

35. Ibid., file 270 (Catherine Bru, widow of Jean Bories).

length of time the husband had served and the rank he had achieved. A sampling of pensions paid out by the Ministry of the Interior during the first decade of the twentieth century reveals that the average amount of a widow's pension was 330 francs per year, a very small and inadequate amount. However, this average obscures important variations, with a few fortunate women, presumably the wives of senior bureaucrats, receiving one thousand francs while others had to be content with little more than a hundred.³⁶ The records of the Ministry of Public Works for the same period give some idea of the sort of pension that a widow could expect depending on her husband's rank. A lighthouse-keeper or dam-keeper knew that his widow would be provided with a very small sum (between a hundred and two hundred francs) even if he had served thirty or more years. The widow of an engineer could expect to receive at least three or four times as much, while a woman whose husband had attained the rank of engineer-in-chief seemed guaranteed well over a thousand francs a year.³⁷

It is interesting to note the way that widows addressed the Ministry to obtain their pensions. Even during the Third Republic, when that pension was a legal right, these women still tended to phrase their letters in a fashion reminiscent of petitioners with no clear-cut entitlement imploring the clemency of a powerful lord who had the power to help them or not at his discretion. Many widows obviously felt obligated to explain that they desperately needed the pension due to a lack of financial resources. Sixty-seven-year-old widow Aime, writing in 1908, explained that she was completely indigent and meekly asked for her pension, which was barely more than a hundred francs, the lot of a lock keeper's widow. Widow Aloux, who was roughly the same age as Aime when she wrote to the Ministry in 1900, explained that she was bereft of resources in order to receive her equally humble pension.³⁸ An issue that is hardly ever addressed in the literature on the rise of the welfare state is the reaction of people to this emergent government interventionism: how quickly did individuals adapt to these changes and how did they approach the institutions designed to help them? Did they see these as bastions of Republican impartiality, or as monarchical holdovers that could arbitrarily refuse to help anyone? The evidence above suggests that there was still much ambivalence at the turn of the

36. Based on a sample of sixty files from AN F⁴ 2847, "Ministère de l'Intérieur, Veuves de fonctionnaires, A-B." The women in this sample had become widows at an average age of fifty-one years, while their husbands were less than a decade older when they died. The files do not indicate the deceased husband's rank, and in certain cases the widow also seems to have received unspecified pensions from the Ministry of War for services rendered by her husband in the military.

37. AN, F¹⁴ 3077 and F¹⁴ 3078, "Ministère des Travaux Publics, Pensions."

38. AN, F¹⁴ 3077, Aime and Aloux.

century,³⁹ but Chapter 4 will show that this attitude changed dramatically by the 1920s.

Although the widows in these files are normally only shown as supplicants and victims, some were bolder than others, and did not hesitate to argue with administrators regarding the amount of their pensions. It was obvious that such women had some familiarity with the laws and regulations that applied to them. In 1862, Mrs. Pierron, a widow from the Var, wrote to the administration to complain that the pension that she had been awarded two years earlier was significantly inferior to the one she believed she had a right to. She went on to argue that there must have been an administrative error of some sort that caused the decision to be taken on the basis of an older law that was less advantageous for her. Despite this authoritative and hard-headed approach, Pierron still bolstered her claim by explaining that she had a young child and was apparently incapable of finding employment.⁴⁰

Finally, it should be noted that the widows of civil servants in France's vast colonial empire received certain perks to compensate for the supposed rigours of living "among the natives." The Governor General of Indochina decreed in August 1928 that the widows of white civil servants in the colony would receive immediate financial assistance, regardless of financial need, and whether they were living in the colony or back in France.⁴¹ In addition, widows could be allocated additional assistance for a maximum of one year or temporary relief for a maximum of three years.⁴² A widow's financial burden could also be eased with scholarships and bursaries for their children.⁴³ As far as actual pensions went, the standard governmental arrangement was followed wherein a widow was entitled to half the retirement pension for which her husband would have been eligible, although this was increased by 10% for each child she had under the age of twenty-one.⁴⁴ Finally, if the widow was living in Indochina when her husband died, the government paid for the move back to France and provided her with a special relocation

39. These letters are strikingly reminiscent of those from the early nineteenth century in which widows were very conscious of not having clearly-defined rights and of being at the mercy of official favour. David G. Troyansky, "'I was Wife and Mother:' French Widows Present Themselves to the Ministry of Justice in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Family History* 25, no. 2 (2000).

40. AN F¹⁰1569, file 52 (Madame Veuve Pierron). The bureaucrat in charge of her case was not swayed by her arguments and maintained that the pension that she had been awarded was the correct one.

41. J.N. Carizey, *Les droits des veuves et des orphelins des fonctionnaires européens en service en Indochine* (Hanoi: Les Presses Tonkinoises, 1930), 15-16, 19.

42. *Ibid.*, 27-28, 31.

43. *Ibid.*, 48. If the children were attending *grandes écoles* or taking preparatory courses to enter them, the bursaries and scholarships were significantly increased and would have been more than sufficed to cover the costs of education, making clear the elite nature of the system.

44. *Ibid.*, 101, 103. Legal experts advised widows to be certain to acquire a medical certificate stating the cause of death, since the amount of the pension would be higher if it could be proven that it was that result of an illness contracted while in the colonies.

supplement that was worth five hundred francs for every year the husband had served.⁴⁵ There were clearly certain advantages to life in the colonies.

Only a few private companies provided their employees or their widows with pensions during the Third Republic, and these were as inadequate as those of most civil servants. The *Compagnie des Chemins de Fer du Midi* (a company operating railroads in southern France) offered its workers retirement pensions: during the 1890s, employees had to be sixty-five years old before they could start drawing a pension, and were required to have been contributing to the fund for at least twenty-five years. The pension was equal to half the average salary earned during the last six years of employment.⁴⁶ Although such a company was ahead of its time, the sum in question was barely adequate for a couple, and the woman's situation became even more difficult if her retired husband died: as a widow she was entitled to half his pension, which meant a quarter of the salary that he had been earning when working. If a railway employee died while on duty, his widow could receive a similar half-pension only if the husband was at least fifty-five years old and had been working for the company for at least twenty-five years.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, information regarding the pensions provided by private companies is scarce, and it is therefore extremely difficult to compare them to government ones. Even as far as widows of civil servants are concerned, the evidence available is patchy and does not allow the historian to draw many conclusions. However, the preceding clearly shows that, aside from a few fortunate individuals, the pension that the widow of a government employee could hope for was a paltry thing indeed. Nevertheless, it was a sufficient inducement to encourage many a widow to write to the government and plead her case, even when she must have suspected that the answer would be negative. Simply put, a little money was better than no money at all, and poor widows had no choice but to scrape together whatever income they could from a variety of

45. Ibid., 186, 208.

46. *Compagnie des chemins de fer du Midi, Pensions de retraites en faveur des agents commissionnés, des ouvriers des dépôts et ateliers, de leurs veuves et des orphelins âgés de moins de dix-huit ans* (Paris: 1891), 3, 6.

47. Ibid., 11-12, 16. Designed to cover a broad range of employees, this policy's practical benefits may well have depended on the position of the individual concerned. The company's bureaucratic and clerical staff was no doubt earning a comfortable middle-class income, and the policy may have provided a retired couple or an elderly widow with a decent living, especially if the husband had managed to be promoted to a higher post. The same was probably true of many skilled workers such as engineers and mechanics, but the situation was no doubt quite different for unskilled workers who only scraped by during their entire working lives. According to one contemporary law-school thesis, the average widow's pension provided by the railroad companies towards the turn of the century was in excess of a thousand francs, but this seems quite unlikely. Maurice Dubut, *Les Droits des Veuves et des Orphelins d'après les lois de prévoyance sociale en Allemagne et en France. Thèse pour le Doctorat*. (Paris: Imprimerie Bonvalot-Jouve, 1907), 59 footnote.

sources if they wanted to survive.

Mutual Aid

With pensions for widows so rare and so inadequate, French families sought to take advantage of whatever other means were available to ensure that wives were not left financially bereft when their husbands passed away. Mutual aid societies were often their first choice, and Cheysson underestimated the extent to which these organizations were willing to accept women as members and provide assistance to widows.⁴⁸ Although mutual aid societies were popular in many parts of the country and among many different professions, we will concentrate on those created by government employees; since these societies were often restricted to a very specific locale or profession and their members earned little, they could only provide very small pensions or payments to widows. Even such limited assistance was sometimes as dependent on the charitable impulse of philanthropic patrons as on the much-lauded foresight of a husband.⁴⁹

French mutual aid societies have not been studied in any great detail, which is somewhat puzzling since these organizations had become quintessential French institutions by 1914 and remained extremely important during the following decades. The first such organizations were small groups of relatively well-off workers (almost entirely male) who banded together to protect themselves from the risks of illness or accident during the Restoration and July Monarchy. In exchange for the payment of a modest initiation fee and monthly membership fee, these men were assured compensation in case of temporary incapacitation. Such voluntary organizations appealed to workers in the absence of state welfare or private charities that would help able-bodied men, and by the time of the 1848 revolution, these “primitive insurance companies” probably accounted for over a hundred thousand members across the country. Napoleon III had a certain fondness for the mutual aid societies, and decreed in 1851 that these were henceforth to be considered public instruments of social betterment since they encouraged workers to practice foresight (“*prévoyance*”). By 1890, over one million Frenchmen belonged to mutual aid

48. Many of the organizations that we will be looking at were not technically mutual aid societies, although they clearly functioned as such for all practical purposes. Most of them referred to themselves as “amicable societies” or something of the sort.

49. Rachel Fuchs made the same discovery when looking at maternity insurance programs in turn-of-the-century Paris, where philanthropic contributions and subventions from the municipal and national government were ultimately more important than membership dues. Rachel G. Fuchs, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris: Strategies for Survival in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 149.

societies.⁵⁰

Although the 1890s seem to have been bountiful years in terms of recruiting new members, who numbered over two million by 1902, it was not long before the mutual movement became stalled and its limitations exposed.⁵¹ Some social reformers had believed that mutual aid societies might form the basis of a national system of social welfare, but this possibility was rendered unlikely by the discretion that mutual leaders had when it came to refusing membership to those they considered too risky. According to Paul Dutton, this shortcoming was particularly in evidence when it came to women, since most mutual aid societies wanted nothing to do with covering the cost of incapacitation during pregnancy and the relatively high risk of death during childbirth. In those rare cases where women were allowed to join mutual aid societies, they were usually banned from attending meetings or serving on the governing board. Furthermore, they received lower indemnity rates than their male colleagues for work absences because of the higher wages that men earned.⁵² The low wages of women workers also certainly meant that the majority could not afford the “luxury” of paying regular dues to such a society.

Émile Cheysson, that passionate defender of widows, was particularly keen on mutual aid societies and believed that such organizations should do more for women in general than was the case. He recognized that many mutual aid societies did concern themselves with the widows of members but objected to the fact that these women had no rights within the organization and were ultimately dependent on the benevolence of its leaders. Cheysson considered it grimly ironic that, “overcome with a sense of fraternity that is so humane and generous...the member of a mutualist society forgets his own wife and children who are standing at his side.”⁵³

50. Allan Mitchell, *The Divided Path: The German Influence on Social Reform in France after 1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 223-227. Despite this popularity, most societies were found in cities and larger towns despite the fact that the majority of the French population was still rural.

51. Having originated among artisans, journeymen and middle-class shopkeepers and clerks during the previous century, mutual aid societies had a great deal of difficulty adapting to the demands of an industrialized society. The majority of the working class remained aloof from the mutualist movement, their loyalties lying instead with unions and the political parties allied with them. Paul Dutton, *Origins of the French Welfare State*, 38, 41, 44.

52. *Ibid.*, 43. In 1892 Felix Poissineau, a clothing manufacturer, founded the first maternal mutual aid society in France to help provide for expecting and nursing mothers. Poissineau was widely acclaimed and the society was copied in many manufacturing centres around Paris. These organizations seem to have been remarkably effective in lowering infant mortality rates among their members and promoting the health of working class women in general, but never became very popular, having only thirty-five thousand members in 1910.

53. Emile Cheysson, “Le rôle de la femme dans la mutualité,” *Le musée social: mémoires et documents* (Paris: 1905), 318-321.

In spite of Cheysson's claims, certain mutual aid societies dedicated to widows did exist in Third Republic France. The *Société de prévoyance pour les veuves et les orphelins des adjoints du génie* was fairly typical, its trials and tribulations reflecting the difficulties faced by these small organizations and the extent to which they depended on the largesse of the authorities. The *Société de prévoyance* (a mutual aid society in all but name) had been created during the Second Empire to assist the widows of civil engineers. During the 1870s, earnings had exceeded expenditure by eight or nine thousand francs, due largely to the fact that only eight widows were being provided for,⁵⁴ each one receiving 150 francs a year. However, the situation became more difficult as the number of widows increased steadily: there were sixty-eight of them by 1885, and well over a hundred six years later. To save the society, membership dues were increased, while savings were invested. These investments turned out to be the society's salvation, providing it with about six thousand francs per year.⁵⁵

The society's statutes were slightly revised in 1892, giving the wife of any member the right to a lump-sum payment of three hundred francs immediately after the death of the husband if she requested it.⁵⁶ The society also provided an annual lifetime pension (although it only came into effect a full year after the husband's death), the amount of which was determined each year

54. At first, the society only provided one-time subventions of up to five hundred francs for widows in particularly dire need. Because of this, membership dues had been quite low. Many members quit in protest during the 1870s when the society began providing a larger number of pensions. The administrators had taken this decision because they objected to the investigations that were conducted to determine whether or not widows were truly needy. It had been impossible to ensure that these were always completely impartial, they "constituted a sort of inquisition into the private life of the widow, which terrified most of these unfortunate women" and as a result only those who were desperately needy had asked for help. The society's leaders decided that it was better to run the risk of providing assistance where it was not truly necessary than of not giving it where it is most needed. AP, DX⁶ 9, file no. 284, "Assemblée générale du 19 mars 1898," 5-6, 9.

55. Ibid., "Société de prévoyance pour les veuves et les orphelins des adjoints du génie. Assemblée générale du 19 mars 1898," 5-6.

56. This was a system used by many mutual aid societies. In turn of the century France, dying was as expensive a proposition for those who survived the deceased as it is today. The middle and upper classes had to preserve appearances and could not skimp on funeral expenses: a first class convoy, complete with house and church decorations cost at least two thousand francs, although it was always possible to spend more. The *Pompes Funèbres Générales*, the monopolistic company that was responsible for all funeral services, claimed that it was all but impossible to estimate what the cheapest possible service would cost, since this depended on many factors, but that the widow would definitely have to pay 21 francs in taxes alone. The company pointed out that such a bare-bones service was performed free of charge for the "indigent," although it was unclear what the criteria were for such a dispensation: if they were the same as that used by the Assistance Publique, it meant that only the poorest of the poor could hope for a reprieve. It is also unclear whether a free service dispensed a widow from buying a coffin for her deceased husband, the cheapest of which (made of pine) cost twenty francs, which represented two weeks or more of earnings for the average Parisian home worker. AP, DX⁶ 21, file 964, "Tarif des convois: Service exécuté par l'entreprise des Pompes Funèbres Générales, 1893."

depending on the resources available to the organization. The society was particularly concerned with those widows, mainly young women, who received no state pension for one reason or another, and provided them with supplementary assistance if they had underage children. Annual membership dues varied depending on a member's rank within the civil service, but started at twenty-three francs.⁵⁷

By the mid-nineties, the society was facing fairly grave difficulties. The income from membership dues had fallen by five hundred francs a year thanks to the resignation of some members and the deaths of others. Of course, each such death struck a double blow to the financial balance sheet, reducing membership dues while creating another widow to whom a pension had to be paid. To make matters worse, finding new members had been far from easy, and as a result of all this, the administrative council reduced the size of widows' pensions. It was fortunate that the Minister of the Interior continued to give a thousand francs to the society annually, or else the situation would have been even worse. The president urged members to do everything they could to recruit new adherents, but this appeal does not seem to have been particularly successful. The society had 606 members in 1895, only twelve of which had joined during the past year, during which time thirty that had left. The society was supporting 183 pensioners, providing subventions to eighteen new widows at a cost of 2,500 francs, and continuing to hand out pensions to 152 widows, resulting in an expenditure of 16,569 francs. By this point the pensions were very small (under a hundred francs a year).⁵⁸

Because of such difficulties, the goodwill and financial assistance of the state remained vital to the society. In 1896, the president wrote to the Prefect of the Seine asking him to pressure the Minister of the Interior to give his usual annual contribution of one thousand francs. A few months later, the president was writing to another senior civil servant, again asking him to use his influence on the Minister so that the society might receive the same support it had in the past.⁵⁹ These efforts apparently paid off and by the end of the year the society was in relatively decent shape and could afford to maintain widows' pensions at one hundred francs per annum. This lull in the storm was partly the result of the fact that only one member had died during the past year, and this had helped to avoid over straining the budget.⁶⁰

However, the president felt compelled to address a few troubling issues during the

57. AP, DX⁶ 9, file no. 284, "Société de prévoyance pour les veuves et les orphelins des adjoints du génie. Statuts."

58. Ibid., "Compte rendu de l'assemblée générale du 16 février 1895."

59. Ibid., letters of November 1896 and May 1897.

60. Ibid., "Assemblée générale du 22 février 1896."

following year's general assembly. First, he explained that he had been saddened to notice that certain "comrades" who reached a fairly high rank in the service had abandoned the society. The president urged all members to make a point of expounding the virtues of mutual aid to their young colleagues so that they might not come to share similar delusions. He went on to proclaim that the people who had the highest stake in the smooth operation of the society were the wives of members, since they would be the ones to benefit. Thus, any wife who noticed that her husband had forgotten to send his membership dues was encouraged to remind him of his duties towards the society, towards herself, and towards their children. This reminder was a thinly-veiled admonition to the growing number of members who were having to be reminded to pay their membership dues, a situation that did nothing to help balance a budget that had once again been strained by a large number of deaths. In fact, the membership was continuing to slowly and steadily diminish, although it had been possible to preserve the widows' pensions at a hundred francs.⁶¹ We lose sight of the society in 1899, not knowing whether it managed to survive the worsening membership crisis and financial instability.⁶²

This sort of difficult, tempestuous existence seems to have been the grim fate of most of the smaller mutual aid societies we catch a glimpse of. Hampered by low memberships, late dues and growing expenditures, they had to toil and strive relentlessly in order to provide widows with pensions or premiums that were often negligible. Encouraging members to engage in recruiting was common but of little use, and the small subventions provided by the government often meant the difference between continued existence and utter failure.

Many of the small mutual aid societies that existed in the capital and throughout France faced similar difficulties. The Society for the Protection of the Widowers, Widows and Orphans of Paris City Employees had been founded in 1898 in order to "prevent poverty from becoming the lot of the family of the municipal employee of modest means following the death of one of the parents." Its goal was to complement other mutual aid societies by providing immediate assistance to widows and widowers. The society gave widows four hundred francs at the time of death (widowers only received one hundred) and paid for funeral expenses. In 1900, there were 280 members representing 253 women and 348 children, while the cost of admission was one franc and membership dues were fifty centimes per month. Reporting on the society in 1898, the city's Inspector General stated that the organization, like all those that promoted solidarity and mutualism, was of great interest and could be in a position to render real services if it ever

61. Ibid., "Assemblée générale du 6 mars 1897," 5-7.

62. Ibid., "Assemblée générale du 18 mars 1899," 6, 9.

managed to develop sufficiently and attract a membership that was large enough to be truly self-sufficient. For the time being, however, the Inspector considered the society to be in no position to accumulate any significant sort of capital. Based on this recommendation, the Municipal Council awarded the society a donation of three hundred francs for the next few years.⁶³

A similar organization for firemen was even more humble in scale and scope. Founded in 1883, the society was intended to help defray medical and pharmaceutical expenses, to provide subsistence payments in times of illness, to help pay for funerals, and to provide assistance to widows and orphans in case of death. In 1913, members were charged five francs for admission and a further two francs in monthly dues. At the time of death, a member's immediate family was provided with 150 francs to cover funeral expenses, which was sufficient to pay for an oak coffin and a five-year concession in a city cemetery. The society had just over one hundred members, and in 1912 its annual income was about nine thousand francs, three thousand of which came from a generous donation from the Municipal Council.⁶⁴

The war does not seem to have had a great deal of impact on the popularity of mutual aid societies, and the 1920s and 1930s reveal the same large number of organizations in Paris and across France. The mutual aid society for employees of the national post and telephone company, founded in 1878, predictably had a sizeable membership, although the assistance it made available was still limited. By 1931, the association had a capital of fifteen million francs, and provided, among other benefits, one thousand francs to the widow of a member to defray funeral expenses, plus another thousand to tide her over briefly (she also received a further one thousand francs for every child under the age of eighteen).⁶⁵ In addition, if a husband paid a small premium each year, his widow and each child were guaranteed an allocation of two francs a day for up to seven years. Perhaps more useful was the right of a widow to become a full participating member of the Society and to enjoy all the advantages that accrued therefrom, in particular sickness allowances and a small retirement allocation once she reached the age of

63. AP, DX⁶ 11, file 325, "Société de protection des veuves, voeux et orphelins des fonctionnaires de la ville de Paris."

64. AP, DX⁶ 26, file 1,481, "Société de secours mutuels des ex-sapeurs pompiers de la ville de Paris." Even the city cemetery's road-menders had their own tiny mutual aid society of sorts. There were only fifty-seven active members in 1911, admission cost a single franc and monthly membership dues were a measly twenty-five centimes. Founded in 1908, the society was designed only to provide a small single payment of one hundred francs (and an additional ten francs for each child under the age of thirteen) to a widow upon a member's death. AP, DX⁶ 22, file 965, "Société de secours immédiat des veuves et orphelins des cantonniers de cimetières."

65. *Association amicale des P.T.T.* no. 1 (June 1931), 3.

sixty.⁶⁶

In contrast to the PTT, most mutual aid societies created by government employees of various sorts in Paris were pitifully small during the interwar period, frequently depended heavily on the contribution of non-participating members, and were only able to allocate very humble sums to widows. Admission to the Mutual Aid Society of Municipal Park Watchmen cost five francs and membership dues were four francs per trimester. A widow received one thousand francs upon her husband's death, plus an additional one hundred francs per child under the age of sixteen. In 1923, there were 274 participating members in the society, but non-participating members (wealthy patrons) provided four thousand francs, over a third of the society's total income for that year.⁶⁷

The smallest association that I came across was the *Solidaires de la ville de Paris*, which provided immediate assistance to the widows and orphans of deceased members in the form of a one-time cash donation. As of December 1923, this organization had only twenty-two members (twenty men and two women) and had spent a measly 217 francs during the past year. Monthly dues were fifty centimes, except for the first payment of one and a half francs. Most of the members were road-menders, workers and employees, people who were presumably unable to find a larger society that would accept them.⁶⁸

Equally humble was the Workers' Fraternity for Paris city gardeners, where the entry fee was only one franc and monthly dues were seventy-five centimes. The organization's goal was to aid members in case of death, and the wives of gardeners could join as full members, as could their widows (in which case assistance was given to their children if they passed away). If a member's wife died, he received fifty francs immediately, and a further one hundred francs to help cover funeral expenses or doctors' bills; a widow received fifty and 350 francs respectively.⁶⁹

It could often be difficult to differentiate one mutual aid society from another, since different organizations sometimes catered to members of the same government service or profession. The *Association de prévoyance des employés de la société du gaz de Paris* was

66. Ibid., August 1932, 5.

67. AP, DX⁶ 16, file 719, "Société de secours mutuel des gardes des promenades de la ville de Paris."

68. AP, DX⁶ 16, file 718, "Les solidaires de la ville de Paris." The Municipal Council normally gave this organization an annual subvention of one hundred francs, feeling that it deserved to be encouraged since it provided a valuable service despite its modest size.

69. AP, DX⁶ 11, unnumbered file. This society was very unusual in accepting women and providing them with one hundred francs for childbirth as long as they had been members for a year. Such generosity was perhaps permissible because only nine of the society's ninety-two members were women in 1924.

founded in 1907 and received generous subventions from the state, the city of Paris and the gas company. The association used only a small part of its funds to assist widows, but did not concern itself with providing death benefits since many company employees belonged to another organization that had been created for this very purpose. This older organization, called simply “Le Gaz,” provided the generous sum of one thousand francs upon the death of a member, and was unusual among mutual aid societies in that it admitted women and gave them exactly the same rights as men.⁷⁰ In addition to these two organizations, a completely independent *Association amicale des veuves de guerre du personnel du Gaz* was founded in October 1917. This organization had been created by widows themselves to provide each other with material and moral support; services included a placement office for members and their children, vacation colonies for sickly children, apprenticeship centres for orphans, medical consultations, free loans, and legal council. The association had four hundred members in 1918.⁷¹

Many other mutual aid societies existed in Paris during the interwar period, but several of them were as unconcerned with widows and women in general as Cheysson had believed was generally the case. The *Société amicale de prévoyance de la Préfecture de Police*, founded in 1883, was much larger and more prosperous than many similar organizations created by civil servants. The association was a very large one, with over fifteen thousand participating members and over three thousand retired ones in 1925, which helped to explain its wealth and influence. This organization spent nearly half a million francs on pensions in 1925, but only twenty-four thousand francs on widows and orphans; that same year, members overwhelmingly voted against letting wives join the association.⁷²

The popularity of mutual aid societies among French civil servants was so great that it even spread overseas and was adopted by native government employees in the colonies, where the Mutual Aid Association of the Indigenous Schoolteachers of Cochin China was founded in Saigon in 1914. The salary of such a civil servant was so low that it simply did not permit him to set aside money for his wife and children in case of an emergency. The founders were under no illusions about what they could accomplish given the wages in question, and they

70. AP, DX⁶ 11, file 316, “Association de prévoyance des employés de la société du gaz de Paris. Compte rendu de l’Assemblée générale du 27 mai 1925;” DX⁶ 16, file 724, “Association de prévoyance des employés du gaz de Paris. Compte rendu de l’assemblée générale du 27 avril 1922.”

71. AP, DX⁶ 6, file 189, “L’Association amicale des veuves du personnel du gaz de Paris.” Lenard Berlanstein’s book does not mention any of these organizations, of which only “Le Gaz” was created by employees working for the Parisian Gas Company, which ceased to exist in 1907. Lenard R. Berlanstein, *Big Business and Industrial Conflict in Nineteenth-Century France: A Social History of the Parisian Gas Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

72. AP, DX⁶ 14, file 471, “Société Amicale de Prévoyance de la Préfecture de Police.”

acknowledged that the amount of money that would be made available to a family would be minimal, although they argued that such an exercise would at least “prove to be a good consolation for the bereaved family, who would be pleased by the solidarity of the deceased’s colleagues.”⁷³ The venture unfortunately did not prove to be particularly successful: ten years after its foundation, the association only had two hundred members, and its leaders were disappointed by the number of indigenous schoolteachers who had refused to join.⁷⁴

Very little information can be gleaned about private mutual aid societies in the capital’s archives. According to the literature, mid nineteenth-century mutual aid societies did not offer much in the way of support or assistance to the widows of members, but the *Société de bienfaisance des arts et métiers* of Toulon was an exception. The society’s primary purpose was sick relief, but provisions were explicitly made for widows, who received three to six francs a month depending on how long the husband had been a member. This assistance came to an end if the widow remarried, left the town, or if her behaviour was found to be anything less than exemplary. More typical of mutual aid societies at mid-century was that for workers in arts and crafts in La Rochelle, where a widow could only hope to have the husband’s funeral expenses paid for if he had been a member for at least ten years. A similar society in Chartres also arranged for funeral expenses to be paid, but explicitly stated that the old-age pensions it accorded its members were not transferable to widows.⁷⁵

The records only allow us to catch brief glimpses of the individual components of this galaxy of associations, and we rarely get to follow the progress of one single organization over time. As such, our understanding of the associations and their development must remain incomplete,⁷⁶ but we can nevertheless venture to make a few observations. It seems that mutual

73. *Bulletin de l’association de secours mutuels des membres indigènes de l’enseignement en Cochinchine* no. 1 (1914), 19-20, 25, 50.

74. *Ibid.*, no. 4 (1924), 9, 62. As a result of low membership, the association’s funds were continually low, and it was only able to give widows the measly sum of twenty-five dollars a year.

75. AN, F¹² 4815, “Commerce et industrie 1810-1877,” file no. 1.

76. Aside from straightforward mutual aid societies, there also existed a certain number of self-help organizations that provided “orphanages” for their members’ children, although they also helped mothers raise their children at home. The Society for the Assistance and Hospitalization of the Orphans of French Railroad Workers and Employees was responsible for 565 orphans in 1903, but 514 of them were still with their families and merely being provided with assistance. A large national union of railroad employees also ran an orphanage during those years, and they provided money for those widows (and widowers) who wanted to raise their children at home; if a child went into the orphanage, the parent had to help pay for the upkeep. The union was willing to make exceptions, however, and this was particularly true of widows who found themselves without any sort of pension with which to support themselves. Unfortunately, it is difficult to estimate how common such methods of self-help were. AN, F⁷ 13,666, “Police générale 1852-1936,” file “Société de secours et d’hospitalization pour les orphelins des ouvriers et employés des chemins de fer français. Compte rendu de la septième assemblée générale, 1902-1903;” “Bulletin officiel de

aid societies, whether or not they referred to themselves as such, were extremely popular among government employees and that, contrary to what Émile Cheysson believed, they often devoted a great deal of their resources to assisting the widows and orphans of members. Many were even willing to let women join as full members and participate to the full extent of their abilities. The most important limitations of these societies were their small size and their very finite resources. With dozens if not hundreds of small organizations for every conceivable occupation in Paris alone, each one was often pathetically small, composed of a hundred or fewer members who could only afford pensions worth a few centimes a month. The benefits that the societies could provide to widows were therefore often very small, although it is again worth repeating that every franc must have helped. It seems strange that the members of these associations did not come to the conclusion that a larger organization would be a more efficient one better able to meet the needs of its members. Such thinking would then surely have led to some degree of fusion between some of the small associations, regardless of minor differences in the members' occupations. In spite of these shortcomings and the fact that the contribution of philanthropic patrons was often extremely important, these organizations provided an invaluable service to widows, helping to complement the money they could earn by working or receive from pensions.

Old Widows and Hospices

One might assume that it becomes easier for the historian to spot widows in the historical record as they grow older and begin to represent a larger percentage of the general female population. This is not necessarily true, as widows, whether young or old, tend to fade into the blurry masses of the working classes and peasantry in general, where it is difficult to differentiate one individual from another. The task is only made easier when these women come into contact with state institutions that produce documentary evidence about them. In the case of older people in Third Republic France, the institutions in question were hospices designed to help "respectable" elderly people of limited means end their days in relative comfort. These hospices are particularly interesting since they combined self-help with welfare: residents had to pay for room and board, but they were clearly being subsidized to a certain extent by the city-run institutions. While the institutions did provide its residents with three solid meals a day and kept a roof over their heads, elderly widows had to pay for this newfound comfort by subjecting

la société de secours et d'hospitalization pour les orphelins des ouvriers et employés des chemins de fer français, 22 avril 1922;" "Syndicat national des travailleurs des chemins de fer de France et des colonies. Statuts et règlements de l'orphelinat (1903)."

themselves to a cold and often uncaring institutional discipline.⁷⁷ These hospices should not be confused with modern retirement homes, since many residents were expected to continue working in some fashion.

There were a number of institutions, both private and state-run, devoted to providing refuge for older widows (and also for widowers) in Paris during the Ancien Regime, and these often required payment of some form on the part of the resident. *Les Petites Maisons* was reserved for the indigent and elderly, and by the middle of the eighteenth century widows accounted for over 60% of the residents. Inside the establishment, rules were strict, with all residents having to attend mass and behave in a respectable fashion; transgressions were punished by confinement in a cell or expulsion, and any resident found begging was whipped.⁷⁸ The Salpêtrière hospital also functioned as a hospice, welcoming destitute elderly widows who were left with no choice but to ask for admission into this huge facility which provided care for the sick, the blind, the diseased, the mentally ill and the poor. A certain number of fairly young widows were also housed at the Salpêtrière, and a few even brought their children with them. Obviously, the hospital was often not a place where one went to live out one's last years and die, but rather a temporary expedient that many widows left after a relatively short stay. Residents were obliged to spend most of their days sewing, which helped the hospital balance its budget.⁷⁹

During the Third Republic, institutional care of a similar sort was available for older people who could not afford to survive on their own, but who had some financial resources.⁸⁰ An

77. In this respect, it is interesting to compare the hospices with what seems to have been the only institution geared towards the aged of limited financial means in nineteenth-century Britain, the workhouse. Historian Stephen Hussey has argued that even during the twentieth century, elderly Britons had a fear of institutional care and of living out their last days in a strange new environment away from their family and friends, where strangers governed their daily existence. According to Hussey, the workhouse "challenged the central pillars of working-class respectability, representing a threat to an individual's liberty and independence" and was a cause for shame because of the way in which it revealed the incapacity of that individual to take care of herself. This was particularly true for women, whose self-identities were often largely shaped by the performance of house-keeping and the independence that this brought with it: once in the workhouse, the working-class woman had to submit to others, becoming a dependent. Stephen Hussey, "'An Inheritance of Fear': Older Women in the Twentieth-century Countryside," in *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, eds. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (London: Longman, 2002).

78. Scarlett Beauvalet-Boutouyrie, *Être veuve sous l'Ancien Régime*, 315-318.

79. Ibid., 320, 322-323, 328-329.

80. The 1926 census reveals that of the 71,000 hospitalized women in France who essentially lived at the state's expense due to infirmity or old age, 36,000 of them were widows. Over 28,000 were elderly spinsters, and only 5,000 of them were married. It would seem that elderly or disabled individuals were almost always taken care of by their family if they had one, and that there was therefore a disproportionate number of widows in the state's care. These figures includes not only the "semi-charitable" hospices discussed here, but other institutions operated by the Assistance Publique. Statistique Générale de France, *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 7 mars 1926. Tome I. Quatrième*

important number of Parisians ended their lives in hospices (or “retirement homes,” although the term is somewhat misleading) which were operated by the Assistance Publique. It must be emphasized that these institutions were not purely charitable, since the residents had to pay for their room and board, although this was heavily subsidized by the state. The retirement homes were not intended explicitly for widows, but the demographic realities of the period meant that the majority of women residing in these institutions were widowed. There were five such retirement homes in and around Paris in 1911: Les Ménages was by far the largest and had over 1,200 residents, while La Rochefoucauld had only a third as many. Bigottini and Vineuil accepted only women and had about two hundred residents between them, while in Auteuil, Sainte-Périne was intended for relatively well-off old people. Obviously, these institutions could only accommodate a small percentage of the elderly people living in Paris and its suburbs.

Les Ménages (now known as Corentin-Celton) had been founded in Paris during the sixteenth century but had moved to the nearby suburb of Issy in 1861. The institution was designed to welcome elderly couples, widows and widowers. The only applicants accepted were those who were not completely destitute but who could no longer afford to support themselves. The administration conducted careful investigations to be certain that the applicants and the family members who were legally obligated to support them were really poor enough to warrant admission. Widows and widowers had to be at least sixty years old to enter, while married couples, oddly enough, had to have been married for at least ten years.⁸¹

Pensioners could either pay rent on a monthly basis or make a lump sum payment that covered their stay regardless of how long it would be. In the former case, the administration required some sort of financial guarantee, such as a deed or a railroad bond assured by the state. In 1900, the lump sum payment (payable in cash) was 1,200 francs for a bed in the dormitory, and 1,800 francs for an individual room for a widow or widower; the annual “pension” was 250 francs and 300 francs respectively. Furthermore, residents in private rooms had to provide their own furnishings: an iron bedframe and two mattresses, a box spring, a bolster, two pillows, two wool blankets, four cloth bed sheets, two chairs, a table and a commode or buffet, all of which was required to be in good condition. Residents living in the dormitories did not need to provide their own furniture, but had to make an additional one-time payment of two hundred francs. Residents were also responsible for buying and maintaining their own clothes, and the administration suggested that they plan to spend at least 150 francs a year for this purpose. Les

partie. État civil de la population active (Paris : Imprimerie nationale, 1928), 29.

81. *L'Assistance Publique en 1900* (Paris: Administration générale de l'Assistance Publique, 1900), 173-174, 176.

Ménages was obviously not intended for paupers.⁸²

Residents in private rooms received three francs in pocket money every ten days, half a kilogram of bread per day (slightly more for men), half a kilogram of raw meat every Saturday, and two cubic metres of wood and four hectolitres of coal every year. Those living in the dormitories did not receive money, food or fuel and had to take their meals in the refectory.⁸³ Taking into account the fact that about a hundred francs were returned to the pensioners in the form of pocket money, they paid only 150 or two hundred francs annually for room and board, a very modest sum.⁸⁴

At the turn of the century, the institution had a total capacity of 1,443 residents: there were 208 rooms available for married couples, one hundred for widowers, and 317 for widows, as well as 236 dorm beds for men and three hundred for women. At maximum occupancy, widows therefore accounted for over 40% of Les Ménages' population.⁸⁵

The La Rochefoucauld retirement home in Paris' 14th arrondissement was also intended to welcome people who, while not living in utter poverty, were unable to provide for themselves and did not have family members who could afford to support them. Applicants generally had to be at least sixty years of age and present a certificate signed by their mayor stating that they were of "sound morals."⁸⁶ In 1926, La Rochefoucauld had facilities for 107 men and 122 elderly women.⁸⁷ Based on the number of widows entering the hospice in any given year (sixteen in 1920, five in 1921 and nine in 1922), it seems safe to say that they represented the largest percentage of the female residents.⁸⁸

During the 1920s, the annual rent at La Rochefoucauld was a humble six hundred francs, and half the first year's *pension* had to be paid in advance upon entering. Again, some sort of financial guarantee was required by the administration. The *pension* could also be replaced by a one-time lump-sum payment varying between two thousand and four thousand francs depending

82. Ibid., 175. This figure appears quite high.

83. Ibid.

84. By 1934, yearly rent had increased to 1,800 francs in dorms and 2,400 in private rooms, while the lump sum payments had risen to nine thousand and twelve thousand francs respectively. "Visite à la maison de retraite des Petits Ménages," *Revue philanthropique* (1934), 910-911.

85. Ibid., 144. On 1 January 1896, there were 1,295 residents at Les Ménages: during that year, 458 of them left the institution, while 124 died and 584 new residents arrived to take their places. The mortality rate was estimated at one in eleven, and those who died had been in the home for an average of eight years.

86. AAP-HP B 53879 *Maison de Retraite de la Rochefoucauld: Conditions à remplir pour l'admission* (Paris: 1888?).

87. Jean Couteaux, *La maison de retraite de La Rochefoucauld de l'Assistance Publique de Paris* (Paris: Imprimerie J.Solsona, 1926), 68.

88. AAP-HP, 571-FOSS-5, "Hospice de La Rochefoucauld, registre d'entrées, 1920-1925."

on one's age (the older one was, the smaller the payment, based on the assumption that one would not be residing there as long). New residents also had to make a one-time payment of one hundred francs to cover the value of their assigned furnishings. They were provided with new bed sheets and pillowcases every six months and with a shirt, washcloth and towel every week, but had to buy and maintain their own clothes, which cost an average of two hundred francs a year.⁸⁹

The daily menu at La Rochefoucauld during the 1920s had not been greatly modified since 1867, and was supposedly identical to those in other Parisian hospices, including Les Ménages. While by no means luxurious, the food in these hospices appears to have been decent and was probably sufficient to keep most people in good health. Residents were provided with sizeable daily portions of bread and, of course, wine. While breakfast was nothing more than café au lait, lunch included generous helpings of soup, cheese and vegetables while supper included different kinds of meat.⁹⁰

The rules governing conduct at La Rochefoucauld were strict. Residents could enter and exit the grounds as they pleased, with the reservation that the main entrance was only open from six in the morning to ten in the evening (seven to nine during the wintertime). Residents had to notify the director ahead of time if they wished to spend an evening away from the establishment: if they failed to do so they would be punished by being refused permission to leave the grounds for fifteen days. If such an offense was committed three times, the resident would be expelled. If a resident returned to the establishment while intoxicated, he or she was to be forbidden to leave the grounds for a full month.⁹¹ Similar rules existed at Les Ménages, making it clear that older people entering these institutions had to give up a certain amount of liberty.

A dispute over flowers in 1899 also illustrates the day-to-day life of such an institution and the extent to which a resident's behaviour was supervised and controlled down to the smallest detail. One of the pensioners at Les Ménages wrote to the director in the spring, complaining about a directive that had forced many people to remove flower-pots they kept on their window-sills. The letter included a petition requesting that those flower-loving residents be allocated small individual plots in the courtyard where they could plant and care for a few flowers or other plants. The director answered that a certain amount of space in one of the courtyards had already been allocated for small gardens, and that it was impossible to increase

89. Jean Couteaux, *La maison de retraite de La Rochefoucauld*, 73-74.

90. *Ibid.*, 76.

91. *Ibid.*, 73.

their number since this would infringe on the central courtyard. A few weeks later, the director circulated a memo to explain the reasons behind his original decision to ban flower-pots: these could lead to dangerous accidents and there were concerns regarding the degradation of the building that might result from frequent watering.⁹² These justifications are preposterous, and one is struck by the extent to which the residents were dependent on the patriarchal goodwill of the administration, even when it came to matters of no apparent importance. This was apparently simply part of the price to be paid for the state's assistance.

Living conditions in the hospices were quite tolerable by the standards of the day. A visit to Les Ménages in 1934 made a generally favourable impression on a group of philanthropists. The individual rooms had water closets, central heating, cold and hot running water, and were well-ventilated. The hallways inside the building were quite wide, and the rooms were apparently fairly nice, some of them even having two (!) windows, although the observers pointed out that "they are what their inhabitants make of them." Some of the rooms were kept very clean and orderly and had a cozy, intimate feel thanks to a few "souvenirs of happier days, such as photos hanging on the wall and small objects charmingly disposed throughout," while others were not very well tended to by their residents. The common dormitories, while well-ventilated, were not particularly bright, although the administration was planning to have electric lights installed. The refectories were "perfect" thanks to fresh air, ample light, clean tables and generous portions of food.⁹³

The cultural facilities in these establishments left something to be desired at the end of the nineteenth century, but the situation quickly improved. During the 1880s, the library at La Rochefoucauld was nothing more than a tiny attic room with books strewn all over the floor that was never visited by the residents since it required a long and perilous climb up nearly vertical stairs.⁹⁴ However, administrators made an effort to improve the situation, and soon organized a primary education class that took place each evening and was given by one of the residents, an elderly spinster who had a "special aptitude" for teaching and a patience "worthy of the greatest praises." The courses were attended by seven other elderly residents, all of them illiterate.⁹⁵

In other respects, living conditions in the two hospices were on the whole less than ideal. In 1912, the newly-appointed director of La Rochefoucauld wrote bitterly about the conditions

92. AAP-HP, F78, "Les Ménages, Correspondance," petition of 19 April 1899.

93. "Visite à la maison de retraite des Petits Ménages," *Revue philanthropique* (1934), 909-912. If the visiting philanthropists had one complaint, it was that the payments were quite high in light of the people that were supposed to be assisted.

94. AAP-HP, 594 FOSS 1, "La Rochefoucauld, Registre de correspondance," letter of 29 August 1887.

95. *Ibid.*, 1888, no. 24.

in the establishment, claiming that “there isn’t a single hospice run by our administration where the residents enjoy less comforts than ours, and the irony is that here they have to pay, whereas other hospices are free.” He had recently tried to have the residents’ beds replaced, since the old ones were breeding grounds for fleas that drove the old folks mad. However, this suggestion had been repeatedly ignored by the central administration, and the director felt that this was symptomatic of a peculiar lack of concern for living conditions at La Rochefoucauld.⁹⁶

Determining the exact background of residents in these two hospices is difficult. Historian Elise Feller found that during the first half of the twentieth century, it was three times more common for French women over the age of sixty than men in the same age bracket to die in establishments designed to provide long-term care to the elderly. She also discovered that it became increasingly common for older women of the middle class, particularly the unmarried and widows, to enter “retirement” homes during the interwar period. Victims of inflation and the collapse of Russian loans, these women were unable to afford the independent bourgeois lifestyle to which they had become accustomed, but could still pay for their entrance into an institution that would allow them to live with a certain degree of dignity. Working-class women, however, continued to reject institutional care, which in their case meant the hospice, an institution that was widely considered to be a prison and a place of certain death.⁹⁷

In general, the inhabitants of the two institutions in question seem to have conformed to this profile, coming mainly from the *petite bourgeoisie* and skilled crafts. However, Les Ménages also had a number of very poor residents sponsored by charities and foundations.⁹⁸ The financial hardship faced by certain of these elderly people was made clear by one pensioner’s suggestion. According to policy, all of a resident’s property that was located on the premises reverted to the Assistance Publique when he or she died. The petitioner argued that it would have been a better idea to sell most of these items at low prices to the poor residents who needed

96. Ibid., letter of 4 April 1912.

97. Elise Feller, “Les femmes et le vieillissement dans la France du premier XXe siècle,” *Clio*, no. 7 (1998), 207. This was all the more true since “old age” could actually confer a certain degree of freedom: older women often found themselves freed from the burden of children and the social constraints on their behaviour were somewhat relaxed. Ibid., 208

98. One widow staying there during the 1870s was so poor that she apparently could not afford to buy bed sheets, and was finally moved to ask the administration for the pair which she believed the rules entitled her to have after five years of residence. The director informed her that she was quite mistaken about policy: it was true that he did provide eighty pairs of sheets to the poorest residents who were admitted at the behest of charities that paid the pension for them, but he was not required to do this. The eighty pairs of bed sheets were currently all lent out, and the director told the widow to wait until some became available (which most likely meant after their current user died). AAP-HP, F78, “Les Ménages, Correspondance,” letter of 17 March 1874 from Widow Hustache to the Director.

them, thus assisting those of the deceased's friends and comrades whose limited means did not allow them to purchase new clothes very often. The director admitted that there were a good number of indigents among the residents of Les Ménages "whose families have died out or who shamefully ignore the plight of their elderly members and leave them without resources." However, he had instructed the supervisors to let him know about all those who were too poor to renew their wardrobe, and arranged for central stores to provide them with enough clothing so that they could be decently dressed.⁹⁹

Some of the residents were poor but were apparently not aided by any charity, and had to earn their keep by working. One elderly widow had entered Les Ménages with her husband in 1898, and had begun working in the laundry room two years later (the manner in which the letter is written suggests that she was still working there). Her husband, to whom she had been married for over fifty years, had died in 1905, and due to her great age (she was eighty) she was often lonely. The poor woman had been working in the laundry room for nine years, earning twenty francs a month, but was now too old and nearly blind. Her only means of support was her grandson, whom she had raised, and fortunately he was willing to take her in to end her days, despite the fact that he was married and had three children.¹⁰⁰ Another pensioner in that hospice worked as a tailor for as long as he was able to help pay for his upkeep, until he was finally transferred to the dormitory for invalids when his strength deserted him completely at the age of seventy-nine.¹⁰¹ In 1900, female pensioners were employed to work in the laundry at Les Ménages. Some were paid by the piece, while others were given the occasional item of clothing and paid fifty centimes a day (they typically worked six hours a day). Other women were employed to peel vegetables in the kitchen. The earnings were minimal, but for the women it represented the ability to purchase a few extra things, "which is a very enjoyable luxury when one reaches our age."¹⁰² Living in one of these hospices therefore did not necessarily mean retiring.

Many residents in the hospices had to contend with the physical and emotional pain that comes with old age, and it therefore comes as no surprise to find that suicides were common, something that did not improve the ambiance for the other interneers. At Les Ménages, at least

99. Ibid., petition of 22 March 1909.

100. Ibid., letter of 21 July 1909.

101. Ibid., letter of 16 September 1907. This sad anecdote brings us back to widows and homework. After he was transferred, the elderly gentleman's daughter asked the director for her father's sewing machine: she was a forty-eight-year-old widow who worked from home as a dress maker, earning a paltry two francs a day.

102. Ibid., entry for 17 January 1900.

one such incident occurred per year at the turn of the century. In January 1900, eighty-year-old Mrs. T., a widow, killed herself by jumping out of a third-storey window, an incident that was particularly horrific because she had leapt just as her daughter was entering the room for her weekly visit, and she saw her mother fall to her death.¹⁰³ On 15 May 1902, Mrs. Laurent, a widow, was found dead, having hanged herself from the headboard of her bed.¹⁰⁴ Of course, this grisly tally only mentions successful suicide attempts, and it seems reasonable to assume that for every person who managed to kill herself or himself, there was at least two or three who failed.¹⁰⁵ It must have been rare when more than a few months went by between the discovery of such an attempt, with a resident walking into a room to find someone who had just slit their wrists or throat. Seeing such things or even hearing about them certainly did not help create a cheerful atmosphere.

Old age did not preclude drunken, violent behaviour of the sort which probably did little to make residents feel comfortable. While only the most serious incidents were recorded, they are enough to make one wonder what sort of atmosphere prevailed in the hospices. In August 1888, the director of Les Ménages noted that Mrs. Augier, a widow, had gotten quite drunk and “made some trouble” in the establishment: “this morning, between seven and eight o’clock [!], she was in such a state that no one, pensioner or attendant, was able to restrain her, and it was finally necessary to put a straightjacket on her lest she injure herself or someone else.”¹⁰⁶ A year earlier, the director of La Rochefoucauld had nominated two pensioners, Mrs. Louve and Mrs. Lange, for rewards awarded by the Temperance Society: both women were of “exemplary sobriety” and deserved special mention.¹⁰⁷ This of course suggests that the sobriety of many or most residents, even the female ones, was not quite as “exemplary” as that of these two ladies. Some years later, a subsequent director of La Rochefoucauld reported an unsavoury incident that had recently taken place in the establishment. Although it was certainly not typical, it

103. Ibid., entry for 10 January 1900.

104. Ibid., entry for 15 May 1902. Suicides were also recorded on 14 August 1899, 18 April 1900 and 4 January 1901.

105. Residents threw themselves into the nearby Seine on a fairly regular basis. In 1885, the police rescued a gentleman who had done just this. The seventy-year-old had creatively bound his feet together with his tie in order to be unable to swim, and had the following brief note on him: “I have been suffering horribly for six months, and I can’t take it anymore.” Two years later, Mrs. G., a ninety-two-year-old widow, nearly drowned after “falling” into the Seine. AAP-HP 371 FOSS 1, “Correspondance entre le directeur des Ménages et le directeur général, 1885-1894,” 7 June 1885; 12 August 1887.

106. Ibid., letter of 12 August 1888. One cannot help but wonder why such an institution would have had a straightjacket handy.

107. AAP-HP 594 FOSS 1, “La Rochefoucauld, Registre de correspondance,” letter of 3 November 1887.

reveals that some of the residents were a rough lot and that life in such an old folk's home was not always very peaceful or intended for those with a genteel upbringing. A violent dispute had broken out at lunchtime between a Mr. Georgin and Mr. Boullait over the fairest way to divide an omelette. Mr. Georgin, a tall, powerfully-built individual menaced the other man with his fists and told him that he was going to "smash your fucking face in." Mr. Boullait, a much smaller man who was aware of the violent temperament of his adversary, snatched a knife from the table to defend himself. The two faced each other briefly, but fortunately some attendants arrived to break up the volatile situation. The director explained to his superiors that the instigator of this incident, Georgin, was a chronic alcoholic who had been hospitalized and treated several times for his addiction, but who still wandered around the neighbourhood and the hospice with an open bottle of wine in his hand.¹⁰⁸

On a more cheerful note, old age still had a little happiness in store for certain residents who found true love (again). On 10 February 1886, Mr. Demorgey, and Mrs. Montais, both of them of course widowed, were married; they continued living at Les Ménages, moving out of their respective dormitories into a private room for couples. There was another happy wedding a little over a year later between two individuals who had recently entered the hospice, and yet another one a year later. Roughly three years then went by without any nuptial rejoicing, but two weddings took place within days during the summer of 1891.¹⁰⁹

In spite of these joyous moments, the regular suicide attempts and the violent, drunken outbursts, although rare, doubtless created an atmosphere that many of the widows and other old people in the hospices must have found somewhat oppressive. If one factors in the restrictions imposed by the administration and the frequent need to continue working at the age of seventy, eighty or ninety, it becomes apparent that the "retirement" homes did not provide widows with a better life than the one they had lived before. However, most of these women had probably become accustomed to making do with whatever was available.

* * * * *

Other support systems for needy widows operated in Third Republic France. The investigation of flower makers in the 1900s makes it clear that a number of these women depended on Paris' Assistance Publique. This well-developed municipal system of poor relief was vital, since the city government estimated that at the turn of the century over 5% of Paris' population of 2.7 million people could be classified as "indigent," and the Assistance Publique

108. Ibid., letter of 7 June 1915.

109. AAP-HP 371 FOSS 1, "Correspondance entre le directeur des Ménages et le directeur général, 1885-1894," entries for 10 February 1886, 20 August 1887 and 12 July 1891.

spent over eleven million francs to come to the aid of over 130,000 such people. An important number of these impoverished individuals were widows, and administrators were aware of the special needs of such women. The city's municipal council increased the annual credits available to provide permanent assistance to widows and divorced or abandoned women who were registered as "indigent" due to a large number of children. This allowed the AP to significantly augment the monthly payments that these women received, which had previously varied between three and five francs. Starting in 1905, 200 women (theoretically those with six or more children) now received the far more significant sums of twenty-five francs a month, while another 1,400 received fifteen francs. Although this certainly represented an improvement, the higher payments were only available to a small proportion of needy widows and other single mothers in Paris. Furthermore, the administrators at the Assistance Publique were very careful to ensure that these payments were the only form of public assistance that the women in question received and that they did not "double dip" by receiving aid from the departmental programs to prevent child abandonment or promote breastfeeding.¹¹⁰

In the rest of the country, municipal relief programs provided similar services, but these co-existed with various charities which targeted very specific groups of individuals, including widows. For example, the *Oeuvre des orphelins de la préfecture de police* was composed of nearly nine thousand contributors whose donations provided "pensions" for the widows and orphans of police officers. This aid was all the more precious since in many cases the widow had no right to a pension either from the city or the department since her husband had served for less than ten years. In addition to pensions, this charitable organization also provided emergency funds to the families at the time of death.¹¹¹ Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to get a sense of the number of such charities or of the people that they assisted. It would be particularly difficult, if not impossible, to determine how many widows depended on such philanthropic efforts.

Aside from outright charity, widows relied on informal assistance that some employers provided in lieu of a pension. Eileen DeMarco has found that during the late nineteenth century, a large number of booksellers working for the leading chain bookstore in France were women, many of them widows. When the Parisian publisher Louis Hachette proposed the creation of a

110. "Variétés : les secours et l'assistance médicale à domicile en 1905," *Revue philanthropique*, XXI, 655-657.

111. Experience had shown that this was usually necessary: the widow, her energy sapped by the shock of her loss, often found herself at a loss for the weeks following the death, and soon sank into debt. AP, DX⁶ 26, file 1,188, "Oeuvre des orphelins de la préfecture de police. Compte rendu moral et financier de l'exercice 1904-1905."

chain of newsstands cum bookstores in railway stations in 1852, he suggested that these be operated by retired railway employees and the wives, thus creating a form of supplemental income or even a pension scheme of sorts. The newsstands were duly opened and became very profitable and successful: Hachette had started with forty-three stores across France, and by 1884 there were nearly seven hundred of them. In 1873, 345 of the newsagents employed by Hachette were women, while only twenty-nine were men; among the women, sixty-eight of them were widows. In 1906, 149 of the 156 newsagents in shops serving the Northern Railway were women, and forty-six of them were widows. DeMarco argued that the Hachette company's policy of hiring women and widows was well-known and generally admired. The Minister of Public Works, who was responsible for the oversight of all matters pertaining to the nation's railroads, argued in favour of the Hachette bookstores partly because of the valuable service that they rendered by employing widows of the railroad company's employees, providing these women with resources at no cost to the companies or the state.

Letters from women asking for positions as newsstand operators suggest that these jobs were indeed seen as a form of social assistance, since women applying for the job usually pointed out that their husbands had been a loyal servant of the railroad company for many years, and often went on to add that they were in need of supplemental income to raise their families. The company did its best to accommodate such women, but it was not uncommon for the applicants to outnumber the vacant posts. The practice of hiring the widows of railroad company employees as newsagents continued well into the twentieth century, to the point where in 1954 the national railroad company felt that it had become necessary to draft guidelines for such widowed applicants.¹¹² It would be extremely interesting to know whether other large companies had similar arrangements.

As far as life insurance was concerned, this was an option that was available only to a select few women whose husbands worked for state services such as the railroad or as sailors or

112. Eileen S. Demarco, "Reading and Riding: Hachette's Railroad Bookstore Network in Nineteenth-Century France" (Dissertation, University of California at San Diego, 1996). DeMarco sees the women who worked in these newsstands as veritable entrepreneurs whose initiative and responsibilities contrasted sharply with the servile and repetitive nature of the work most often performed by women at the time. A newsagent's profits depended on her ability to run her store, and many of these women demonstrated a keen business sense, offering ancillary merchandise such as tobacco, stamps and postcards to lure in customers. The newsagent, although she did not work for the railroads, had to be aware of the operation of the station the train schedule. The job was demanding and complex, requiring the ability not only to display and sell merchandise, but to take inventory and do the accounting, as well as hire, manage and supervise personnel in the larger operations. Ultimately, however, the newsagents had to answer to Hachette's roving supervisors, all of whom were men, and whose relations with the newsagents clearly revealed the paternalistic attitude that working women everywhere had to face.

miners (both dangerous occupations) in the private sector. A national life insurance fund had been set up by the government in 1850, but it was very rarely used.¹¹³ Furthermore, the life insurance systems that were in place were quite limited in scope. The widows and orphans of sailors were covered by an obligatory insurance scheme, but it was necessary for the husband to have been at least fifty years old at the time of his death and to have served for at least twenty-five years. Furthermore, unless she had dependent children, the widow herself had to be at least forty years old to benefit from the scheme. Although this must have disqualified a large number of sailors' widows, the *Caisse des de la marine* (founded by Colbert in 1673), which was one of the two organs responsible for providing insurance to sailors and their kin, had nearly twenty thousand widows and orphans on its rolls in 1906.¹¹⁴

These are some of the various forms of work and assistance that were available to widows in Third Republic France. If they were lucky, they received a few francs a month from a government pension or from a mutual aid society. Whether or not this was the case, most of them had no choice but to take a poorly remunerative job and make do as best they could. In addition, they perhaps received a few extra francs from the Assistance Publique or another municipal welfare board, just enough to allow them to survive. As they began to grow old, they could, at best, look forward to ending their days in a dormitory or small room at Les Ménages or La Rochefoucauld, but only if they had somehow managed to put aside a little money.

How exactly did these women manage to survive? The average widow probably used a coping strategy that involved gathering money from a variety of different sources. Few of the widows described above depended only on one only one type of income: the key seems to have been to supplement one principal means of sustenance, as was the case with home workers who were given a little money by the Assistance Publique or received a tiny pension because their husbands had been in the civil service. It is painfully obvious that the average government pension was not enough to allow a woman to live on her own, and that a mutual aid society could only provide her with a small amount of extra money. The vast majority of these women must have depended on waged labour of some sort. Unfortunately, the available sources do not allow

113. Maurice Dubut, *Les droits des veuves et des orphelins d'après les lois de prévoyance sociale*, 56 footnote.

114. *Ibid.*, 133-134. Other European countries implemented national Workmen Compensation Acts during the late nineteenth century. Germany is the quintessential example, but the Netherlands had done the same by 1901. The Dutch case is particularly interesting because it did not assume that the husband was the principal bread-winner in any given household. Marian van der Klein, "The Widows of the Gasworks: Gendered Path Dependency and the Early Dutch Welfare State," *Social Politics* 10, no. 1 (2003), 13.

us to get a detailed look at the lives of these women, and we therefore cannot understand the complex mixture of waged labour, state assistance, self-help and charity that allowed them to at least survive. However, the preceding suggests that the rudimentary welfare measures available during the Third Republic played an important role in allowing poor widows to get by. For some of these women, the small allocations handed out by the Assistance Publique may have been the difference between mere poverty and utter destitution. Of course, state assistance was sometimes indirect, such as the subventions that permitted many mutual aid societies to continue operating and to provide widows with few francs a month. This government-funded assistance, both direct and indirect, foreshadows the interwar period, when such aid would become much more important for a certain category of widows.

Aside from the above factors, it also appears likely that mutual assistance of some sort explained how poorer widows managed to get by, as was the case for widowed mothers in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. By “mutual assistance” I mean informal and spontaneous assistance between people of a similar social class and locality, a system that was common in agricultural villages and fishing towns in Scotland, where friends and neighbours helped keep indigent widows alive whether they were young or old. Such behaviour seems to have been ingrained and traditional, borne of an awareness that the givers themselves or someone close to them could soon suffer the same fate. This form of support is particularly interesting since it cannot properly be described as paternalism, charity or philanthropy. It is inconceivable that French working class widows could have survived without such informal assistance, which unfortunately escapes the historian’s gaze.¹¹⁵

On a darker note, while the generosity of the nineteenth-century poor towards each other may have been admirable, it might also help explain why social welfare was so inadequate: believing that the most unfortunate members of society helped each other survive, the government perhaps felt little need to assist them. As Émile Cheysson rightly pointed out, the misery of widows simply did not attract widespread public interest.

Any manifestation of concern over widows often had little to do with the women themselves, but rather with their children or lack thereof. In 1912, Parliament debated a law that would have provided impoverished widows with young children a certain degree of

115. James Winter, “Widowed Mothers and Mutual Aid in Victorian Britain,” *Journal of Social History* 17, no. 1 (1983): 115, 125. Did this sort of mutual assistance extend to sharing households and daily expenses as historians have suggested was the case during earlier periods (see page 20)? A sampling of the 1926 census in Paris (see Appendix 1) is certainly not enough to allow us to make generalizations on this point.

assistance (the law on large families of 14 July 1913). The natalist rationale for this proposal was flagrantly obvious, and the usual arguments were trotted out: Germany's population had increased by twelve million since the Franco-Prussian War, while the figure for France was, at best, an anaemic three million. Working-class men in France, the argument went, were deliberately keeping their families small because they worried that if something happened to them, misery and suffering might be the lot of those left behind if there were too many children. Proponents of the law admitted that it would be expensive, costing the state roughly twenty-four million francs per year, which was not a negligible sum, but one that was fully justified by its contribution to solving a problem "on which depends the vitality of our race and the existence of our nation."¹¹⁶ These legislators were completely unambiguous when it came to their intentions: they were not particularly concerned with helping widows as such, only with ensuring the survival of their children, and only insofar as these represented valuable human resources. We will see this sort of thinking again when we look at the government's efforts to help war widows in the aftermath of the Great War.

Although Cheysson may have underestimated the degree to which mutual aid societies concerned themselves with widows and had an excessively rosy view of the fate awaiting aged widows, he was correct about the fact that these women could expect very little from the government or society at large. The state of widowhood, although it was often accompanied by many hardships, did not entitle a widow to a great deal of help from her fellow citizen or government. It was not until the mass slaughter of the First World War that things began to change, at least for some widows.

116. "Quelques considérations sur la proposition de la loi relative à l'assistance obligatoire aux veuves privées de ressources et chargées d'enfants, par le Dr. Peyroux, député de la Seine Inférieure," *Revue médico-légale* (1912), 81-83. The law involved giving sixty francs a year per child under the age of thirteen as long as the widow had two such children. There were 252,644 such widows in France, among which about 70% were deprived of any means of support, and who accounted for about 400,000 children aged thirteen or less.

2: WAR WIDOWS' PENSIONS AND THE WARDS OF THE NATION

Women who lost their husbands on the battlefields of the Great War benefited from unprecedented generosity on the part of French legislators. Various forms of assistance were made available to them, and while the programs in question were extremely modest by modern standards, they were often of invaluable help. To begin with, the state provided all war widows with pensions, although these were not sufficient for a woman to support herself and her children. Furthermore, the government “adopted” all the children whose fathers had been killed during the war, and if necessary provided their mothers with subventions to help pay for their upkeep or education.

Such forms of state assistance for war widows, while designed to deal with the consequences of an unprecedented national calamity, must be understood in the context of the welfare state that was slowly beginning to emerge in interwar France. In both cases, the spectre of natalism was omnipresent: we will see that law-makers, who often appeared to have a marked distrust of widows, gave much thought to the question of the French birthrate before deciding on how large a pension to allocate war widows and whether or not these pensions would be withdrawn in the case of remarriage. Likewise, the adoption of war orphans and the associated subventions were intended largely to help children, and it was often merely a coincidence that this necessarily involved providing assistance to the family unit as a whole. The situation was complex and politicians and bureaucrats were not monolithic in their thinking, but it is clear that war widows were often valued not as individuals but as mothers.

The French government's efforts to help war widows also mirrored the all-too common paradoxes of modern welfare, where a genuine desire to help is combined with an inflexible, centralized and rigid bureaucracy that does not hesitate to invade personal privacy. The government organizations created for the purpose of helping war widows and orphans were headed by individuals who often treated their charges in a condescending and overbearing fashion reminiscent of “old-fashioned” charities. Administrators were obsessed with centralization, and considered it perfectly natural for the Parisian headquarters to set national policy, regardless of the fact that local bureaucrats were better qualified to determine the needs of widows. Finally, we will see that these newly-created extensions of the state were charged with the morally loaded task of differentiating between “good” and “bad” mothers and ensuring that only the former received help. Such judgements carried all the more weight because of the rhetoric that surrounded war widows and their children, who were enjoined by politicians and

bureaucrats to live up to the memory of the heroic war dead.

In spite of all this, the situation of war widows was not as grim as it might seem, and such women were more than passive recipients of state aid. They made use of the new measures in unexpected ways, often going against the spirit underpinning the laws: such was the case with government “adoption”, which widows saw as a source of financial aid rather than a mark of honour. In practice, administrators also acted with more pragmatism and restraint than one might have expected considering the lofty rhetoric that politicians had used when speaking of war widows.

Ultimately, however, war widows found themselves in a difficult predicament: even as they benefited from unheard-of generosity on the state’s part, they had to accept that this was due largely to their potential as mothers or to the sacrifice of their deceased husbands.

Pensions

Providing pensions to the widows of dead soldiers was nothing new in France, dating back to the revolutionary period. Soon after the Revolution began, the National Assembly passed a bill that significantly reformed military pensions, although war widows did not benefit greatly from this. The new law simply stated that such women were eligible for an “alimony” payment of sorts: the amounts in question were not specified, and the text made it clear that the payments were understood as welfare measures rather than as rights that had been earned. The coming of war in 1792 and the influx of tens of thousands of volunteers into the army, many of them married, forced legislators to take further steps. The Convention swiftly passed amendments that clarified the earlier law, stating that war widows were entitled to permanent pensions equal to half their husbands’ pay, as long as they could prove that they were unable to support themselves without such assistance. Members of the Convention believed that soldiers who knew that their wives would be provided for in the case of injury or death would be more willing to give their all when defending the Republic (an idea that would be echoed during the Great War). A year later, at the height of the Terror, the Convention passed a strikingly egalitarian bill that guaranteed all needy war widows a pension of three hundred *livres* a year, regardless of their husbands’ ranks.¹ Such generosity soon proved to be expensive, and by Year V war widows’ pensions were costing the state over three million *livres*. The Directory therefore passed a new bill that reduced pension benefits, reintroduced real if limited distinctions based on

1. Isser Woloch, “War-Widows’ Pensions: Social Policy in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France,” *Societas* 6, no. 4 (1976): 237-240.

husbands' ranks, and redefined "neediness" so that fewer women were eligible. This new bill once again implied that war widows' pensions were nothing more than a sort of official charity for the deserving poor. Things went from bad to worse for the majority of war widows during the following years, particularly under the Empire.² The financial difficulties created by widows' pensions in the aftermath of a major conflict and the government's subsequent attempts to take back what it had given foreshadowed the events of the 1920s.

The pensions allocated to widows and orphans during the Great War were based on a law of 11 April 1831, which had been periodically revised over the years. Payments, which depended on both the husband's rank and the cause of death, were quite generous. The widow of a simple soldier who died of sickness judged to have been caused by his military duties received 375 francs per year, and this was increased to 563 francs if the death had been the result of wounds inflicted by the enemy. In pre-World War I France, this was at least more than a woman could hope to earn by doing outwork in the artificial flower industry. Furthermore, widows received 80% of their pension until the formal title was delivered to them by the military administration, a measure that alleviated the temporary hardships that could occur as a result of bureaucratic delays.³

However, the law of 1831 and its subsequent revisions had been intended to deal with the casualties of colonial scuffles and other forms of limited warfare. As a result, the bureaucratic machinery nearly ground to a halt under the weight of applications that came pouring in once French soldiers began to die by the thousands in mud-filled trenches in 1914.⁴ Administrators were quick to recognize that the existing pension laws were completely inadequate for a lengthy and bloody war, but claimed that everything possible was being done to deal with the problem:

The state owes assistance and protection to the families of soldiers who gave their lives to defend French soil...However, the current measures that it had created for peace time are not sufficient for the needs of the actual war, the deadliest of all time. Intended for

2. Ibid., 241-242. The reintroduction of full gradation according to a husband's rank and the Emperor's capricious whims ensured that there was a great deal of disparity in the living condition of war widows: those whose husbands had held a high rank or had served in a unit of which Napoleon was particularly fond were far better off than most of their counterparts. Ibid., 245-246.

3. H. Fougerol and A. Saillard, *Les droits des veuves et des orphelins des militaires tués à l'ennemi*, 3rd edition (Paris: 1917), 24, 32, 38. The amounts of these pensions had been quite generous prior to the war, but as inflation began to play havoc with the franc's value (see below), the sums in question became increasingly inadequate.

4. Three hundred thousand French soldiers had been killed by the end of 1914, and 25,000 had died in the Battle of the Marne alone. Jean-Jacques Becker et Serge Bernstein, *Victoire et frustration, 1914-1929* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), 39.

fewer cases and rendered inflexible by bureaucracy, these laws were simply not made to deal with the large number of applications that has resulted from a virtual *levée en masse* of the nation...pre-existing rights have therefore been broadened...in a generous spirit of humaneness and conciliation between the interests of the state and those of the individual...⁵

French legislators did indeed take certain limited steps to aid both the wives of mobilized men and war widows. In October of 1914, the government issued two decrees that allowed the wives of mobilized officers and sub-officers to receive half their husbands' pay, unless the men in question formally objected to this. Such a measure was necessary because a large number of men had been so surprised by the call-up that they had failed to make adequate preparations for their families, who found themselves in great difficulty once deprived of the husband and father's pay packet. These same governmental decrees were vitally important for widows, who were entitled to continue collecting this half-pay until hostilities had ended. As always, the widows of civil servants were more fortunate than their counterparts whose husbands had had the misfortune of working in the private sector: the second October decree allowed such women to receive half their deceased husband's government salary until the war ended.⁶

However, these provisions had no effect on the wives and widows of the common soldiers who formed the overwhelming bulk of the French army. Many of these women continued to receive the separation allocation of 1.25 francs a day that the government had been providing since August 1914 to those wives of mobilized men who were deemed needy.⁷ This was fortuitous, since bureaucratic chaos meant that it could take months for a war widow to receive her first pension cheque.

The law of 1831 also included provisions for financial aid to be provided by the Ministry of War to widows, orphans and dependent parents who had not been allocated pensions (in cases when a soldier's death was not the result of a wound or illness incurred during military service). This financial aid was not a permanent right similar to a pension, and was only provided if the survivors were deemed to be, after suitable investigation, sufficiently needy and

5. H. Fougerol and A. Saillard, *Les droits des veuves et des orphelins des militaires tués à l'ennemi*, 9.

6. *Ibid.*, 12, 21. A decree of December 1914 extended the same privilege to the widows of state railroad workers and employees.

7. The women also received half a franc a day for each child under the age of sixteen. This measure quickly proved to be controversial, since it represented an improvement in the living standards of certain segments of the population, namely day-labourers and small-scale farmers. There was also much grumbling about the fact that many of the recipients did not appear to be all that needy, and that women often wasted the money on frivolous luxuries. Despite such complains, there was widespread acknowledgement that the allowances were often necessary and helped to boost morale during difficult times. Jean-Jacques Becker, *Les Français dans la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980), 22-25.

“worthy of interest.” *Faute de mieux*, government officials began to interpret these laws very loosely in order to provide war widows with additional assistance. Only a few weeks after the Great War started, a government circular authorized widows to receive such financial aid without any investigation being conducted, and a second circular issued in early 1916 allowed widows with pensions to be awarded temporary financial aid if their situation was deemed to merit it. These two measures were tacit acknowledgment that widows faced long delays before receiving their pensions and that these were frequently insufficient to meet their needs. The temporary assistance in question was only 150 francs a year for the widow of a soldier or corporal, and this was a one-time payment that was not renewable.⁸

Once they became aware of the inadequacies of the existing pension system, legislators attempted to reform it, but progress was predictably slow. During the first few months of 1915, deputies presented seventeen separate projects for new pension laws. However, the government wanted to produce its own project, and therefore created a special extra-parliamentary committee that studied the question carefully for several months.⁹ The committee did not present its report to the Chamber of Deputies until November 1917, and by the time the Senate approved the bill, the war had ended.

According to Article 14 of the law of 31 March 1919, all widows of soldiers who had died as a result of wounds inflicted by an enemy or while carrying out orders during wartime had the right to a pension. Furthermore, the same right was extended to the widows of husbands whose deaths were the result of an illness contracted during service or worsened by the stress and duty resulting from such service. However, this was true only if the couple had been married *before* the war or in the case of a woman who had married a veteran who was an invalid. All war widows had the right to a premium of three hundred francs a year for each child under the age of eighteen.¹⁰

The exact amount of money that a war widow received depended on the cause of a soldier's death, as had been the case with the law of 1831. Widows whose husbands had died as a result of military accidents, “dangers” (a vague catch-all category that was *not* intended as a macabre joke), or illness related to the performance of their duty received a so-called “normal”

8. H. Fougerol and A. Saillard, *Le droit des veuves*, 41-43, 45, 48. Even such meagre wartime pensions and allowances for widows could elicit bitter scorn from contemporaries, some of whom felt that hardy young women who were able to work did not deserve such assistance. Pierre Darmon, *Vivre à Paris pendant la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Fayard, 2002), 216-217.

9. JO, Débats parlementaires, Chambre des députés, Séance du 22 novembre 1917, 2099.

10. *Commentaire pratique de la loi du 14 avril 1924 sur les pensions civiles et militaires* (Paris: Louis Pabon, 1925), 81, 84.

pension, while widows of husbands whose deaths had been the result of actual battle wounds received an “extraordinary” pension. The third type of military pension that a widow could receive was a “reversion benefit” (*pension de réversion*): this was awarded when a veteran who had a disability pension later died of unrelated causes. It is surprising to find that the legislators often tried to be as generous as possible when it came to differentiating between these three broad categories. Thus, the widow of a soldier who died after accidentally shooting himself while cleaning his weapon near the front lines was entitled to the more generous exceptional pension, despite the fact that her husband had not technically died at the enemy’s hands.¹¹ However, such technicalities were irrelevant for the vast majority of war widows since the wives of common soldiers received eight hundred francs a year regardless of the exact cause of their husbands’ deaths (with the exception of the *pension de réversion*). A widow’s pension also depended on the rank her husband had held (see table 1), with the widows of officers usually receiving at least twice as much as those of common soldiers.

Table 1: Annual Pension Rates for French War Widows Based on Husband’s Rank, 1919

Rank	“Exceptional” Rate	Normal Rate	Reversion Rate
Division General	5,230	3,500	3,500
Brigadier General	4,400	3,000	2,850
Lt-Colonel	3,000	2,000	1,850
Battalion Chief	2,300-2,700	1,650-1,850	1,375-1,650
Captain	1,900-2,200	1,450-1,600	1,200-1,325
Lieutenant	1,700-1,800	1,350-1,400	1100-1150
Sub-lieutenant	1,500	1,200	975
Chief Warrant Officer	1,400	1,150	950
Warrant Officer	1,300	1,100	900
Senior Officer Cadet	1,250	1,075	850
Sergeant-Major	1,200	1,050	800
Sergeant	1,100	950	700
Corporal	900	875	600
Soldier	800	800	500

Source: Commentaire pratique de la loi du 14 avril 1924, 220.

Military pensions for widows became effective the day after their husbands died, and were paid out each trimester. While waiting for the pension to be liquidated (something that could often take months, at least initially), the widow could apply for a temporary allocation. War widows did not lose their pensions if they remarried (unless the new husband was a

11. Joseph Caperan, *Commentaire de la loi du 31 mars 1919 sur les pensions militaires, suivi des barèmes et des tableaux officiels* (Paris: 1919), 51-52. This interpretation of the law is particularly interesting, since such “accidents” were no doubt almost always suicides.

foreigner, in which case the wife automatically lost her citizenship and all benefits deriving from it). However, after having been remarried for a year, a widow could choose to renounce the pension, at which time she received a final lump sum payment equivalent to three years' worth of pension cheques; the pension itself would then revert temporarily to any minor children.¹² War widows could lose their pensions if they were stripped of their paternal authority.¹³

In addition to pensions and premiums for children, war widows benefited from certain other advantages, including reserved employment¹⁴ and free training.¹⁵ However, it seems that women often did not avail themselves of these opportunities, either because they were unaware of them or because they were too inconvenient. This led to some official disapproval during the early 1920s (at a time when female participation in the workforce was desirable), but the criticism appears to have vanished as the years went by and the country's economic situation

12. Commandant C.-A.H. Vincent, *Guide pratique sur les pensions d'invalidité (officiers et troupes) et les pensions de veuves de guerre* (Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle, 1923), 185, 189-190. The decision to continue providing remarried war widows with a pension had proved very controversial (see below). Ultimately, such pensions would only be suppressed in 1941 by the Vichy regime, and even then only newly remarried war widows were affected.

13. *Commentaire pratique de la loi du 14 avril 1924*, 85. Pensions were not restricted to soldiers, widows and orphans, the law of 1919 acknowledging that a son was often a vital support for his aged parents or grandparents. A soldier's ascendants could therefore claim a pension if they were invalid, incurably ill, or over sixty (father) or fifty-five (mother) years of age. If a soldier's parents were no longer alive, it was even possible for the ascendant's pension to revert to the grandparents, albeit at a lower rate. Widows of civil war victims were entitled to a pension, as were the widows of indigenous soldiers, although these were much smaller than those of French widows. C.-A.H. Vincent, *Guide pratique*, 200, 209-210.

14. It is difficult to describe these programs in details because of the many changes they went through during the 1920s and 30s. However, the law of 30 January 1923 gave war widows the right to apply for reserved employment if they had not remarried or if they had at least one child under the age of eighteen. Women could apply regardless of their age, although priority was given to the youngest ones and to those with several children. These reserved jobs were governmental ones, whether at the national, departmental or communal level, and were most often of a secretarial nature. For example, three quarters of typist jobs in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Colonies were reserved for war widows in 1924. A few jobs required more than typing skills, such as the auxiliary trainees in the Ministry of Labour, who had to have a mastery of basic accounting. Only a handful of posts were truly interesting, such as the analytical chemists at the Parisian Prefecture of Police. *Emplois réservés aux anciens militaires pensionnés pour infirmités de guerre ainsi qu'aux veuves, orphelins de guerre et aux victimes de la guerre* (Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle & Cie, 1923), ix, 2910-2911, 2919, 2923, 2937. This policy was similar to the French army's experiment in employing women during the war, which was presented as a means of giving jobs to needy war widows, but was actually motivated by a shortage of male personnel. Margaret Darrow, *French Women and the First World War*, 246-254.

15. A decree of 21 May 1919 gave war widows with pensions the right to professional re-education in order to earn a living. A few of the schools created by the state throughout the country to re-educate disabled veterans also accepted war widows, such as the one in Brest that taught straw or ratan-weaving, bookbinding, cardboard packaging and gilding. This policy had been implemented once politicians belatedly realized that the pensions of the 1919 law did not provide women with enough money to survive. Louis de Fouchier, *Guide pratique des mutilés, des réformés, des veuves de guerre*. (Paris: Librairie du Recueil Sirey, 1930), 75, 82, 90.

worsened.¹⁶ The inadequacy of these measures would become a source of complaint for widows' organizations during the 1930s (see Chapter 4).

The law of 1919 meant that hundreds of thousands of war widows now received eight hundred francs a year from the government. What did this number mean in concrete terms? It is of course always difficult to compare the purchasing power of a unit of currency in the past to one in the present, but the case of France during the interwar period is particularly problematic. After decades of stability, four years of total war saw the franc's value plummet, a pattern that continued during the 1920s and 1930s, albeit in an erratic and unpredictable fashion that makes it difficult to ascertain exactly how much a franc was worth at any given time. What is certain is that during the war, prices soared, increasing by about 25% per year in spite of government price controls. By the time of the Armistice, retail prices were on average two-and-a-half times higher than they had been in 1914 (with the exception of rents, which had been capped by the government).¹⁷ Retail prices continued to rise sharply in 1919, even as the pension law was being passed by Parliament, although the next two or three years brought a certain measure of relief as prices generally fell. After this, there was a great deal of fluctuation, but in general prices increased quickly, and by 1928 retail prices were 5 ½ times higher than they had been in 1914, and would only start to fall again in 1930 and 1931 thanks to the Great Depression.¹⁸ The effects of soaring prices on the populace varied a great deal depending on one's source of income. In general, salaries increased to keep pace with the rising prices, but the situation was dramatically different for those who depended on savings and other forms of fixed income, and an entire sub-section of French society suddenly found itself ruined.¹⁹ War widows, whose pensions were adjusted irregularly and inadequately, suffered many of the same difficulties.

We can put a widow's pension into perspective, albeit in a very crude fashion, by comparing it to the earnings of a day-labourer, who was estimated to make an average of seven

16. Government officials in Versailles addressed the issue in 1922 by reminding war widows that they had the right to professional reeducation, and that it was unfortunate that they did not always avail themselves of it: "Whether this is from ignorance or negligence, from lack of conviction or because of indecisiveness, we do not want to know: we are simply making an observation." Widows were patronizingly informed that it was their moral duty to learn a trade, and were reminded of the President of the Republic's recent pronouncements on this subject: "Only the dead have the right to rest. We, on the other hand, owe it to them to continue their work and make their wishes and hopes come true." Versailles, Archives Municipales, Carton 5082, "Office National des Mutilés et Réformés de la Guerre—Comité départemental de Seine et Oise: Réunion des victimes de la guerre du département" (Versailles, 2 July 1922), 13.

17. Alfred Sauvy, *Histoire économique de la France entre les deux guerres. Tome I. De l'Armistice à la dévaluation de la livre* (Paris: Fayard, 1965), 315, 331.

18. *Ibid.*, 333, 337.

19. *Ibid.*, 359.

thousand francs a year in Paris or 4,700 francs in the provinces in 1921.²⁰ Such an individual's yearly income was therefore six to eight times greater than that of a war widow who depended on her pension alone. To understand the purchasing power of a widow's pension, we need to know that in 1920, a kilogram of bread cost roughly one franc, a litre of milk cost a little less, and a kilogram of butter or beefsteak cost around fifteen francs.²¹ A war widow's daily budget was just over two francs, which means that if she bought a kilogram of bread, she would have had a little more than a franc left for purchasing other food or clothing, or paying for heating, miscellaneous expenses and rent. Pensions for war widows were therefore quite obviously insufficient to allow a woman to support herself and her family, a problem that was only aggravated by the rampant inflation of the 1920s. A lengthy legislative process and normal bureaucratic red tape meant that readjustments lagged several months behind the franc's sharp falls in purchasing power, making life even more difficult for war widows and leading to many complaints from the organizations representing them.²²

In fact, despite the ever-changing value of the franc during the early 1920s, pension rates were not revised until 1925. The law passed that year represented the single greatest increase during the interwar period, with most war widows' pensions nearly doubling in value.²³ However, remarried war widows were less fortunate and found that lawmakers had frozen their pensions at the old rate, meaning that these became worth less and less as the franc's value steadily fell over the coming years.²⁴ Periodical revisions followed during the next few years, and a (single) war widow's annual pension stood at nearly four thousand francs by 1930. During

20. Pierre Goulène, *Évolution des pouvoirs d'achat en France (1830-1972)* (Paris: Bordas, 1974), 86. It is worth repeating that such calculations are very imprecise. Alfred Sauvy's estimates are more modest than those of Goulène: he claims that a day-labourer in the Paris-based metal-working industry would only have earned 4,900 francs during the fourth trimester of 1920. Alfred Sauvy, *Histoire économique de la France*, 508.

21. Rémy Allasure, Jacqueline Fourastié and Jean Guilhelm, *Document pour l'élaboration d'indices du coût de la vie*, 28, 62, 72, 86.

22. See for example *Bulletin périodique de l'Association départementale des veuves de guerre de la Charente-Inférieure* no. 1 (June 1925) where the secretary-general asked the government for a readjustment of pensions to compensate for recent "dramatic" price increases.

23. The modifications of 1925 were the result of concerted pressured from veterans' organizations that had banded together to insist on higher pensions because of the rising cost of living. The threat of gigantic manifestations in the streets of Paris made politicians give in to most of the veterans' demands. Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française. 2. Sociologie* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1977), 96-97.

24. This decision is of primordial importance in light of the debates over a remarried widow's continued right to a pension during the parliamentary debates over the 1919 law (see page 79) and the energy that war widows' associations devoted to this issue (see page 178). Unfortunately, the legislation has left little trace in the *Journal Officiel*.

the mid-thirties, the government decreased war widows' pensions for the first time, an emergency measure forced through by decree-laws and prompted by the state's need to reduce expenditure. The pension cuts, although they came at a particularly bad time, were eventually offset by small increases over the next few years. In spite of these changes, the absolute value of a war widow's pension remained largely unchanged, and was always several thousand francs less than the salary of the lowliest civil servant.²⁵

While these pensions were modest by any standard, politicians and civil servants often begrudged them due to the amount of money they represented when added together.²⁶ Pensions were only one new element that inflated postwar French budgets, and in the short term they were less costly than the effort necessary to undo the damage that the war had wrought in the north-eastern departments where it had been fought.²⁷ Over the years, however, pension payments consumed an even larger portion of the national budget: in 1926, nearly four billion francs were spent on pensions, making it the third largest item in the budget after defence and debt repayment; this number had risen to 4.5 billion two years later and to 5.4 billion by 1933. Thus, after twenty years or so, the 1919 pension law had cost the state nearly a hundred billion francs, or roughly 2% of national revenue.²⁸ It should therefore come as no surprise that politicians often balked at the cost involved in providing war widows with pensions, even though each such individual pension was so small as to be of limited help to the woman in question.

Due to a lack of surviving records, it is impossible to determine what percentage of war widows who applied for pensions were turned down. Because the associations created to represent war widows and lobby the government did not consider such cases to be a major problem (see Chapter 4), one can assume that the government did not usually try to shirk its responsibility by refusing pensions to widows who were clearly entitled to them. The scanty records for pension tribunals found in the Paris municipal archives indicate that those widows

25. Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française. 1.*, Table 25. For a more detailed discussion of pension readjustments and purchasing power, see Stéphanie Petit, "La pension de veuve de guerre 14-18: une pension de fidélité?" in *1914-1918: Combats de femmes*, ed. Évelyne Morin-Rotureau (Paris: Autrement, 2004), 122-125.

26. Determining the exact number of war widows (and war victims) who were drawing pensions is very difficult. See Appendix 2 for more information.

27. By the end of 1923, over 250,000 private homes, 75,000 farm structures, 5,000 public buildings, 6,700 public establishments, 20,000 miles of road and 3,300 miles of railroad had been rebuilt, at the astronomical cost of sixty-six billion francs. Benjamin F. Martin, *France and the Après Guerre: Illusions and Disillusionment* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 195.

28. Alfred Sauvy, *Histoire économique de la France*, 189, 195. The French state compounded its difficulties in this area with a controversial 1930 law that provided veterans with a small "retirement pension" once they reached the age of fifty. *Ibid.*, 194.

who were turned down during the early 1920s tried to interpret the pension law rather broadly. Mrs. Julliard's husband had been leaving a restaurant with some friends in Versailles one night, and excused himself to go urinate; a few moments later his companions heard him scream and rushed to the scene to discover that he had been run over by a tramway, having apparently tripped over the wire that was next to the track. Since he had clearly not died as a result of his military service, his widow was judged to have no right to a military pension.²⁹ Widow Nicod's husband had died at home when a grenade that he had brought back from the front and carried around in his pocket exploded suddenly. Not only was this deemed insufficient grounds for the granting of a pension, but the tribunal reminded Mrs. Nicod that her husband's behaviour had been a flagrant violation of military regulations (and that he would no doubt have been severely reprimanded had he lived). The widow argued that her husband had been showing signs of mental imbalance at the time, and that it was this altered state, a result of his service, that led him to behave in such a fashion. The tribunal was unconvinced by her evidence, replying that it was all too common for returning soldiers to play with live ammunition or grenades that they had brought back with them.³⁰ While such appeals appear grimly farcical, they may well have been motivated by dire financial need, with the widow casting about desperately for any source of support, including a war victim's pension.

It is interesting to compare the situation of French war widows to their counterparts across both the Rhine and the Channel, where such women ultimately received even less assistance from their governments. German widows of the Great War faced the bleak prospect of raising children alone with a meagre government pension that was rendered almost useless by inflation and the global economic crisis. Between 1.7 and 2.4 million German soldiers had died during the war, almost half of them under the age of twenty-five and a third of them married. The new German republic had to provide pensions for 370,000 widows, to say nothing of more than a million orphans and half-orphans. In fact, the war had probably produced about 600,000 widows, but nearly a third of them had remarried by 1924, making them ineligible for a

29. AP D.U.5 5844, Dossier no. 116, 2 décembre 1921. This poor woman was actually represented by a lawyer in this case, and one cannot help but feel that this individual should have known better.

30. *Ibid.*, Dossier 147, 19 janvier 1922. Civilian widows sometimes also tried their luck with the pension tribunals. Widow Toviller of Paris chose to appeal the Ministry of Pension's 1921 decision to reject her application for a civilian victim's pension. Her husband had died on 18 November 1918 after having been run over by a truck a week earlier: his widow claimed that his death had been the result of obscurity caused by the war-time restrictions on street lighting. The tribunal replied that this was an unreasonable claim and would have led to a limitless and absurd interpretation of which deaths had been caused by the war. *Ibid.*, dossier 1,106, 2 novembre 1922.

pension.³¹

The National Pension Law, which was only passed in 1924,³² was predictably less than generous due to the financial difficulties faced by the new regime. The system used to determine the amount of a pension was more complicated than in France, but also more just, since it took into account various factors such as the cost of living in different parts of the country. A widow's pension was one third of that which her husband would have received had he been deemed 100% disabled (unless she was over fifty or had children to support, in which case she received half). A further small supplement was provided for each child under the age of eighteen. Almost every war widow was ultimately accorded a slightly different pension, because her husband's full disability pension, even if purely hypothetical, was based on his prewar earning capacity and took into account factors such as education, social position and previous employment.³³ The system therefore differed from the French one, where pensions were based purely on rank (although rank itself was usually directly related to the soldier's socioeconomic background).

The details of the new German law were in a sense unimportant, since the entire pension system had begun to collapse soon after the war, and the new legislation did nothing to improve matters. Pension offices and courts were flooded with applications, and the bureaucratic complexity drove applicants mad. The pension courts were quickly expanded, but even so their workload was so great that the entire apparatus slowed to a crawl, and millions of war victims still had no idea what their pension would be five years after the Armistice. Meanwhile, the new German republic, crippled by the burden of reparation and reconstruction, could ill afford the "luxury" of hundreds of thousands of pensions, even if each one was almost insignificant to the recipient. The Labour Ministry continuously tried to cut back pensions, and managed to have

31. Karin Hausen, "The German Nation's Obligations to the Heroes' Widows" in Margaret Higonnet et al, eds., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 128.

32. Although the government did not pass a new pension law until 1924, the issue had been discussed since the earliest days of the war, with the Reichstag holding a special conference on "Social Welfare for War Widows and Orphans" in 1915. The conference was opened with these words: "Every day the German soldier faces his enemy and looks death in the eye, but today it is our duty to remove his heaviest care, that for his wife and child. In this conference we are to suggest the way and means to absolve the German people's debt of gratitude and to do justice to those left behind by our fallen soldiers." The resemblance to the French rhetoric is striking: here also pensions seem to be motivated more by honour and "debts of gratitude" than by the needs of widows and their children. Ibid., 129-131. Note that Robert Whalen's interpretation of the rationale behind the German war pension law is completely different. Robert Weldon Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914-1939* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), 102-103.

33. Karin Hausen, "The German Nation's Obligations to the Heroes' Widows," 136-137, 140.

half a million people removed from the rolls in June 1923.³⁴

Those who were able to continue collecting pensions were hardly better off than those who had been cast aside. A veteran deemed to be completely disabled received payments so small they could not keep him and his family above the poverty line by the beginning of 1921, and widows were even worse off, their condition being nothing short of “catastrophic.” The Labour Ministry continued to savagely cut the pension budget between 1928 and 1933, and the National Socialist regime did not improve matters despite paying a great deal of lip service to veterans and war victims.³⁵

The condition of war widows in Great Britain was also less than favourable. Prior to the First World War, no system of pensions for the wives of common soldiers existed, although in 1901 the government had begun to provide a miserable pension of five shillings per week to those widows who had worked for their husband’s military units washing, sewing and mending. Shortly after the Great War began, the government extended the questionable benefits of the existing pensions to all war widows: however, it took many months for the bureaucratic staff to be increased to a suitable level and catch up with the backlog, making for long delays in the implementation of the law. When the pensions finally arrived, they must have been a crushing disappointment to most widows, since they were lower than the separation allowances had been (this system was similar to the French one). The government justified this by claiming that the expenses of a widow were less than those of a wife with an absent husband, but ultimately decided to double pensions in 1915.³⁶

The British Ministry of Pensions was more stingy than its French counterpart and took advantage of any opportunity to deny a war widow her pension. Widows of soldiers who had been shot for desertion had particular difficulty having their rights recognized, but widows were also often refused pensions on the grounds that their husbands’ deaths had been due at least in part to their own carelessness or negligence. Unlike in France, a British woman who married a soldier who later died as a result of injuries contracted during the war was *not* eligible for a pension. Furthermore, the widow of a man who died as a result of wartime injuries or disease could only receive a pension if the death occurred less than seven years after he had been

34. *Ibid.*, 141-143, 145-146.

35. *Ibid.*, 148, 161, 170.

36. Janis Lomas, “‘Delicate Duties’: Issues of Class and Respectability in Government Policy Towards the Wives and Widows of British Soldiers in the Era of the Great War,” *Women’s History Review* 9, no. 1 (2000): 123-47. The introduction of separation allowances in Britain led to many of the same widespread concerns and fears as in France.

discharged.³⁷ These restrictions were justified by the fact that the Royal Charter that made provisions for war pensions in Britain clearly stated that these were granted as a favour rather than a right, a situation that was in marked contrast to the French case. As a result of such parsimoniousness, only 130,000 war widows were receiving pensions in 1936, while another 117,000 or so had remarried.³⁸ Comparing this figure to the 600,000 war widows receiving pensions on the other side of the Channel (see Appendix 1) suddenly makes the French state seem rather generous.

The parallels between the belligerent nations are striking. In all three countries, the pensions provided to war widows during the conflict itself were based on antiquated laws designed for peacetime and administered by bureaucracies that were completely overwhelmed. The new pension laws in France and Germany provided small amounts of money that could not possibly allow a woman to survive on her own, but added to the financial difficulties of countries economically crippled by four years of war. The fate of war widows on both sides of the Rhine and across the Channel was a grim one if they did not have other sources of income to supplement their tiny pensions.

Behind the 1919 Pension Law

An examination of the parliamentary debates that led to the adoption of the 1919 law reveals the attitudes of the legislators towards war widows and their children, and the reasons why these men crafted the law in the way they did. Not surprisingly, there was no monolithic governmental attitude towards women and widows. There were, at best, certain broad tendencies, but there was also a great deal of uncertainty and fluidity, and in this sense the Chamber probably reflected the attitudes of French society at large. That being said, we can easily spot a marked inclination to see war widows as mothers first and foremost and to be more concerned with their children than anything else, attitudes that went hand-in-hand with natalist thinking on the part of many men in Parliament.

What was the rationale behind the pension provided by the French government to war

37. This bizarre stipulation led to horrific moral dilemmas for certain veterans: "It is now three years since I contracted this disease, and unless I die within four years from now my wife and children will be deprived of their pension. I know that by taking the greatest possible care of my life I might live a few years longer, but what a horrible feeling it is to me to think that if I prolong my life by care beyond that time limit by doing so I leave my wife and children destitute." Ibid, 132-133.

38. Ibid., 137-138. Lomas believed that many pension recipients chose to cohabit rather than remarry so as not to lose the precious financial assistance; this is interesting since such a scenario was so dreaded by many French legislators (see below).

widows? Why did these women whose husbands had died while in the army receive tax-funded support, no matter how inadequate it may have been, when other widows received nothing? The First Republic and successive regimes had never managed to successfully answer these questions once and for all, and had sometimes seen such pensions as rights earned by the husband's sacrifice and at other times as a means of assistance.

How then did the legislators of the Third Republic understand the pension law of 1919? The answer is that each individual saw it however he wanted to. When the government's pension committee first presented its report in 1917, certain deputies (mainly from the Left) complained that it was rather vague about the basis for pensions. According to these critics, the report generally implied that pensions were the state's way of compensating individuals for the harm they had suffered, but at other times appealed to some sort of "gracious concession" on the state's part. The hostile deputies argued that pensions were the right of any French citizen who had sacrificed himself or a loved one for the defence of the nation. Such a person was entitled to obtain fair compensation from that nation as represented by the state, and this was not a question of generous impulses, but rather one of absolute rights and of debts owed to individuals.³⁹ However, other deputies such as the left-leaning Mr. Bonnevey, disagreed with the very notion of compensation: they argued that one could compensate citizens for the loss of property, but that it was ridiculous and obscene to suggest that the same could be done for a missing limb or a deceased spouse or child. According to this view, the pension law was a manifestation of national gratitude towards war victims.⁴⁰ Pierre Masse (unaffiliated), the inspiration behind the legislation, attacked those who interpreted the pensions as favours of some sort granted by the state: he forcefully argued that the proposed law repeatedly stated that pensions were a *right*, something that the State owed to victims of the war.⁴¹ This debate was a rather fruitless one and was never truly resolved, which is hardly surprising considering how vague many of the participants were. Ultimately, the most pragmatic interpretation was that of Jules Lugol (Radical Left), the reporter for the pension committee:

Here is what is certain: there exists a formal right to a pension or bonus (*gratification*) for disabled veterans and war widows. On what is this right based? If the right is recognized and accepted, it does not *matter* whether it is based on social risks, national solidarity or the idea of rewards for services rendered. We must not waste our time debating doctrinal matters of this sort: what is important is to recognize that this right

39. *JO, Débats parlementaires*. Chambre des députés. Séance du 27 novembre 1917, 3037.

40. *Ibid.*, Séance du 4 décembre 1917, 3121. However, it is telling that this same deputy contradicted himself in the same speech, referring to the pension payments as "assistance," demonstrating how unclear the entire issue was in the mind of most legislators.

41. *Ibid.*, 3122.

exists and to ensure that it is applied.⁴²

Because there was so little agreement regarding the basic rationale behind a widow's right to a pension, hammering out the details proved to be a long and drawn-out process.

Over the course of the debates, certain deputies doggedly fought to prevent childless war widows from receiving a pension altogether, making it clear that for them, helping a widow was only a means of helping her children. Foremost among these men was Jean Bon, an eccentric socialist militant and S.F.I.O. member, who bluntly argued that the state should concern itself first and foremost with those war widows who had children to support. He argued that in such cases, the state had to replace the lost husband and do everything to help the children who had been adopted by the nation. However, it was obvious to Bon that childless war widows should not be assisted, since to act otherwise would create a category of citizens who received payment from the State for reasons that no one quite understood. War widows certainly had the right to the solicitude of all French citizens, but how could one pretend to ease their emotional pain by providing them with money?⁴³

Bon insisted that it was a bad idea to provide young single women with a small income for a variety of reasons. He argued that the great majority of war widows were between the ages of twenty-five and thirty and that such women should not receive pensions if they had no children, lest they become *rentières*. Even worse, they might consider their employment earnings to be a sort of bonus and be willing to work from home for a pittance, driving down salaries for everyone. Employers would then feel perfectly free to pay these women less than their pensionless colleagues; according to Bon, this had already happened during the war with separation allowances.⁴⁴ Obviously, Bon failed to realize that the average widowed homemaker

42. *JO, Débats parlementaires*. Chambre des députés. Séance du 23 novembre 1917, 3023.

43. *Ibid.*, Séance du 5 février 1919, 420. Bon was willing to make an exception for war widows who were thirty-five years of age or older. Once widows reached this age, Bon considered it reasonable to offer them some sort of support: such women were not yet old, but they had most likely "lost the spring in their step" and it would be very difficult for them to rebuild their lives, particularly when it came to finding new husbands. Fin-de-siècle observers, whether they were doctors, social commentators or novelists, agreed that women became "old" at a much earlier age than men did. A man was not considered truly "old" until he turned sixty, sixty-five or seventy, while a woman became "old" when she turned fifty (and sometimes earlier) despite the fact that everyone was aware that she would probably live longer than her male counterpart. Predictably, this verdict was related to a woman's ability to bear children and her ability to lure a mate. According to the aesthetic canon prevalent at the time, a woman began to lose her "freshness" during her thirties, and with it her desirability. If she was wise, she would retire from sexual competition at this point, realizing that she was already middle-aged and could do little more than await the beginning of "old age," which was only a few years away. Louise Feller, "Les femmes et le vieillissement de la France," 202-205.

44. *JO, Débats parlementaires*. Chambre des députés. Séance du 5 février 1919, 421.

had already been working for a pittance before the war, and that it was practically impossible for employers to pay such women any less than they already did.

The majority of his fellow deputies did not seriously consider Bon's proposal, and many argued that Frenchmen had fought and died so valiantly in part because they had believed that the government would take of their wives if they did not return, regardless of how old they were or whether or not they had any children (as we have seen, a common line of thought).⁴⁵ Bon's proposal was extreme and attracted little support, but it was only the most visible manifestation of a widespread tendency to conceive of widows' pensions as a means of ensuring the well-being of their children. Combined with a natalist agenda and a certain degree of squeamishness or uneasiness at the thought of remarrying widows, this resulted in heated arguments where the well-being of the widows themselves was often of secondary importance.

From the very beginning, several deputies from both the Left and Right criticized certain aspects of the pension committee's project on explicitly natalist grounds, and the ensuing debates also addressed the thorny question of remarriage and the rights of remarried war widows to pensions. The first draft of the committee's report included a provision whereby a war widow would automatically lose her pension if she remarried, but many legislators commented unfavourably about this article and asked that it be removed.⁴⁶ These demands were usually motivated by the fact that deputies saw the article as an incitement to cohabitation (*prime au concubinage*). Defenders of the proposal, and there were several of them, claimed that the state was not responsible for supporting a woman who so quickly forsook the memory of her deceased husband (someone sarcastically interjected that the committee members had apparently been inspired by St. Paul's views on marriage) and that widows should be discouraged from remarrying, since they were taking husbands away from young women. Even deputies opposed to the article were willing to see this latter justification as legitimate, since they believed that remarried widows were likely to have fewer children than younger single women, a situation that would obviously not help to bolster the birthrate. However, the critics insisted that a man who wanted to marry a widow for her pension would simply refrain from doing so and become her lover, a situation which did not help anyone.⁴⁷

The debate over this question was both lengthy and fierce.⁴⁸ Alexandre Lefas (Union

45. Ibid.

46. *JO, Débats parlementaires*. Chambre des députés. Séance du 27 novembre 1917, 3038. At one point, several Deputies, most of them Socialists, cried out that "This is no way to increase the birthrate!"

47. Ibid., Séance du 4 décembre 1917, 3121-2.

48. This issue probably represented the single most important point of contention for the Chamber of Deputies, aside from the question of parents' rights to a pension.

Républicaine Démocratique), president of the pension committee and an ardent natalist,⁴⁹ explained the rationale behind the proposed law in blunt terms:

What is it that we want first and foremost? It is certain that we want to give a pension to the dead soldier's widow, but only in her role as the mother of the soldier's children that she must now raise on her own. Before all else, the Chamber owes it to the fallen hero to help his widow raise his children, not provide her with a dowry to help her remarry!

In practice, Lefas continued, the law would make no real difference to the great majority of war widows since the pension would devolve to their children: being good mothers, they would continue to be responsible for their offspring, and they would be the ones to receive the pension on their behalf, spending the money as they thought best. When a war widow's last child turned twenty-one, she would receive a lump-sum payment worth three years of pension payments. Lefas explained the rationale behind the law and the reasons why the state should not be too generous towards war widows:

The reason, more important than all others, is the necessity of ensuring this country's security and the future of the race by increasing our birthrate. There is nothing more important or more noble than this, and this mission must always be uppermost in the legislator's mind...France must not commit racial suicide once more, which it is even now doing with each household having just over two children.

How could this deficit of births be eliminated? Certainly not by providing older war widows with financial advantages that would often make them more desirable marriage partners for men who would neglect younger and more fertile women. Lefas claimed to have numbers that proved beyond doubt that remarried widows were not at all fertile and were therefore failing to help France prepare for the future.⁵⁰

Lefas' lengthy tirade⁵¹ was approved of by many deputies, but the majority in the

49. It comes as no surprise that this lawyer and deputy from the Ile-et-Vilaine became secretary-general of the *Conseil supérieur de la natalité* in 1920; he also held the same post in an organization charged with defending large families. *Dictionnaire des parlementaires français: notices biographiques sur les ministres, sénateurs et députés français de 1889 à 1940, Tome VI*, edited by Jean Jolly (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1960), 2202. Lefas invoked the birthrate time and time again when defending the parts of the report dealing with widows' pensions and children's bonuses, and insisted on providing more money to war widows with several children. *JO. Débats parlementaires*. Chambre des députés, Séance du 30 novembre, 3103.

50. *JO, Débats parlementaires*. Chambre des députés. Séance du 12 décembre 1917, 3246.

51. Lefas went so far as to read one of the "many" letters that he had received supporting his position on the issue. The letter began as follows: "A widow who contracts a new marriage finds a new means of support, a protector; her pension must disappear. Anything else would be contrary to morality." The epistolary harangue explained that a widow's pension was hers solely thank to her husband's actions and that this always had to be kept in mind: "Who gives the widow the right to a pension? The man who gave his life for France. Towards whom do we have the greatest obligations? Towards this man's children." The letter-writer concluded by confirming Lefas' opinion that pensions for remarried widows were against

Chamber ultimately opposed him. They refuted his “logic” with various arguments, many of them legalistic and having to do with acquired rights and the need for uniformity between different laws, but their trump card was always the belief that the proposed law was an incitement to concubinage, an expression that was repeated *ad nauseam* during the course of the discussions. In spite of this rather moralistic approach to the question, certain deputies were more level-headed. According to one left-wing Deputy, a Mr. Bonnevey, the role of the Chamber was not to pass laws in light of an ideal, theoretical morality completely detached from reality, but rather of contemporary social mores as they really existed. To those who worried about “pension hunters,” Bonnevey replied that the law would not make these men disappear and that they would still achieve their goals. Bonnevey went on to argue that the proposed article was designed to protect the interests of young brides, but that it was unclear how those interests were served by marrying them to such unscrupulous men. In short, the proposed article was a direct assault on the institution of marriage, which was the keystone of society.⁵²

The legislators continued to argue in circles, with many insisting that public opinion was adamantly opposed to letting a remarried widow continue to receive a pension and that it was obvious to everyone that a widow who remarried was no longer a widow and could not qualify for a *widow's* pension.⁵³ In spite of such protests, the Chamber of Deputies voted to suppress this contentious article by a two to one margin, which showed the extent to which opinion was divided.

Things did not end there, however, as there was some concern among Deputies that remarried widows might not necessarily have the best interests of their deceased husbands' children at heart. A few members proposed amendments to the article which would have forced the widow to spend her pension payments on the children of her first marriage. They claimed that children from a first marriage would often be disadvantaged in comparison to those of the second marriage, and that it was immoral to let women use a pension that the sacrifice of their first husbands had entitled them to any way they pleased. While this sort of rhetoric indicates a profound distrust of working-class and peasant mothers, other Deputies were worried that well-meaning war widows might often find themselves at the mercy of new husbands who had little reason to worry about their step-children, and that it was necessary to impose certain limitations

the interests of the French “race” since such women would produce fewer children. *Ibid.*, 3247. Of course, it is impossible to know how many such letters Lefas actually received and whether or not it genuinely represented widespread opinions. Similar opinions put forth by certain widows' associations (see Chapter 4) certainly suggest that this letter-writer was more than an isolated crank.

52. *Ibid.*, 3248.

53. *JO, Débats parlementaires*. Chambre des députés. Séance du 19 décembre 1917, 3357.

on the ways that pensions could be spent to avoid such abuses. The influential committee reporter Jules Lugol was opposed to such measures, and eventually won the day. He stated that he and the entire pension committee were of the opinion that mothers had to be trusted and that the government could not assume that they would be unworthy of their responsibilities and neglect their children's needs. The fact that a few women would fail to live up to their duties did not warrant making special provisions for such cases in the law.⁵⁴

In these arguments and debates, we can grasp the complex, confused attitudes towards the question of widows' pensions that were typical of the French government and society as a whole. Pronatalist concerns were never far from the thoughts of the legislators, and it was clear that they often saw war widows as little more than mothers and that their real preoccupation was children. The attitude of politicians towards war widows was conflicted: they often saw them as irresponsible and prone to immoral, antisocial acts, but at other times were willing to believe that most of them would behave in a moral fashion and wanted to help them as best they could. Such a paradoxical attitude towards these women was typical of other governmental bodies that we will look at, such as the Wards of the Nation.

Wards of the Nation

Given the inadequacy of government pensions for widows and their children, such women had to find other sources of assistance, the most popular choice being the state subventions for so-called Wards of the Nation. A law of 24 July 1917 decreed that the French nation "adopted" the child of every French soldier who had fallen on the battlefield; the orphans were given the title of *Pupille de la Nation* and a National Office was created to assist them in various ways. Although the Wards of the Nation's creation was accompanied by much rhetoric about "fallen heroes," it was another manifestation of the French state's growing willingness to intervene in private life to help women, or rather their children, during the Third Republic.

There were certainly precedents for the adoption of soldiers' children by the French nation, the first of which occurred when the National Convention decided to adopt the daughter of the recently assassinated revolutionary Lepeletier de St. Fargeau. The rhetoric and symbolism of this occasion would set the tone for the decades to come: during a special ceremony, the young girl's uncle pointed out the President of the Assembly to her and said "This is your father!" He then presented the girl to the entire Assembly and to the spectators present, saying

54. Ibid., 1^{re} séance du 26 décembre 1917, 3570-71, 3573. Lugol was an uncompromising defender of war widows, and his attitude towards these women was far less utilitarian than that of his fellow politicians. Ibid., 3571.

“People of France! This is your daughter!” The first large-scale adoption took place in December of 1805 when Napoleon ordered that the children of all the officers and soldiers who had died at the Battle of Austerlitz were to be adopted by the Nation. The law of 13 December 1830 decreed the adoption of the children of all those who had died during the fighting in July of that year, while the law of 6 July 1849 did the same for children whose father had perished while serving during the June Days. A similar decision was taken on 18 January 1871, using rhetoric that is by now familiar: “All citizens must rise up and fight, and if necessary, give their lives to chase the foreigner from our soil...in light of such sacrifices, they have the right to expect that the Nation will help their families after they fall on the field of battle.”⁵⁵

Soon after the Great War broke out, the National Assembly began considering multiple projects designed to assist the “orphans” of those Frenchmen who were dying daily on the battlefield. After much debate both inside and outside Parliament, the law of 24 July 1917 created the National Office of the Wards of the Nation (*Office National des Pupilles de la Nation*, ONPN).⁵⁶ This law outlined the pyramidal structure that was to ensure the protection of the Wards. At the top was the National Office, a public establishment (attached to the Ministry of Education) designed to coordinate the efforts of departmental offices that worked in close collaboration with small local cantonal offices beneath them.⁵⁷

In spite of the centralized nature of the National Office, a great deal of emphasis was placed on local contact with the Wards and their mothers. The communal correspondent was supposed to do his or her best to stay in permanent contact with families in order to be able to report on the Wards’ moral and material needs. The correspondent was also responsible for “controlling the morality of the milieu in which the child is raised,” had to make certain that the

55. Olivier Faron, *Les enfants du deuil: orphelins et Pupilles de la Nation de la première guerre mondiale* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2001), 87-88. Faron’s fine book is the first work to examine the Office National des Pupilles de la Nation, although his concern is first and foremost with the “orphans” themselves rather than with their mothers.

56. The term “Wards of the Nation” strikes me as being the best translation for the French “Pupilles de la Nation.” The word “ward” automatically makes one think of a “ward of the state,” just as the word “pupille” brings to mind “pupilles de l’état,” a misleading impression that the National Office had to struggle against.

57. Of course, the fact that a devastating war was still being fought on French soil complicated things somewhat, and the establishment of departmental offices was sporadic, although most of them were probably running by the time the Armistice was signed. Nevertheless, resources were still scarce, and many of these offices operated in very rudimentary conditions during the first few years of their existence. In 1920, the Secretary and his two employees in Annecy complained that their office consisted of only one room measuring less than four square metres, and that files were stacked up uncereemoniously on tables, chairs and on the ground. In Chambéry, the Office was located in a room in the local teacher training college, an arrangement that presented multiple inconveniences. Quoted in Olivier Faron, *Les enfants du deuil*, 113. Such regional offices were not fully functional across the country until 1922 or 1923.

children went to school on a regular basis and ascertain that the subventions paid out by the Office were really being used to meet the needs of the children. In addition, he or she had to actively promote the Office and ensure that all widows whose children qualified signed up to have them adopted.⁵⁸ Understandably, it was difficult to find individuals willing to shoulder such responsibilities, and one must question to what extent it was possible to stay in constant contact with all the Wards in any given canton unless the correspondents were exceptionally zealous and had a great deal of free time on their hands. As we will see below, the ONPN in fact often complained that the system broke down at the local level and the correspondents frequently took the blame for this. As volunteers, these individuals were reminiscent of charitable workers, and the important role that they played shows how slow the transition to a “proper” welfare state was and to what extent it relied on private individuals’ willingness to aid their fellow citizens.

It is impossible to ascertain how many of the correspondents were women, but there was definitely an important female presence in the upper echelons of the ONPN. The National Office was based in Paris, and was comprised of a High Council whose main role was to designate the real motor of the organization, a Permanent Section which was composed mainly of social notables and philanthropists. There were many women in the Permanent Section, and their contribution was considered particularly important to the organization as a whole due to the fact that their maternal instinct was deemed vital this type of social endeavour.⁵⁹ A law of 1922 modified the composition of the national, departmental and local (cantonal) offices, in part by mandating that these now had to include a fixed number of women since their typically feminine qualities were considered indispensable to the care and education of orphans.⁶⁰ This policy fell in line with earlier governmental efforts to encourage private charity that relied upon well-off women doing volunteer work of various sorts with organizations devoted to assisting women and children. After all, who better to assist mothers than other mothers?⁶¹ Although the ONPN was a

58. Département de l’Oise, Office départemental des Pupilles de la Nation, *À nos correspondants...* 22-23.

59. It is interesting to compare the ONPN with its Italian counterpart, where there was an even greater dependence on women thanks to the important role of state-appointed *madre* (aunts). The local sub-committees appoint these “aunts,” whose responsibilities included determining the needs of war orphans and widows: thirty-eight such women were selected in the small town of Brescia, and nearly a hundred more for the surrounding countryside. The organization reminded members that being an “aunt” was not simply about giving money, but about “participating in motherhood and assisting the moral development of the widow’s children.” *Gli Orfani di Guerra. Rassegna Mensile*. no. 4 (May 1918), 9-10.

60. Olivier Faron, *Les enfants du deuil*, 130-131.

61. See page 118, note 10. For further discussion of this phenomenon, see for example Alisa Klaus, *Every Child a Lion: The Origins of Maternal and Infant Health Policy in the United States and France*,

state organism financed by taxpayers, it was a fine example of the nebulous line between charity and welfare that continued to exist during the interwar period, with most senior administrators and lowly correspondents being volunteers, many of them women.

Wards were “adopted by the nation,” but this was no more than a figure of speech since the legal tutor (almost always the mother) kept her right of paternal authority.⁶² As long as the mother remained the legal guardian of her children, the Office never interfered directly in the family’s life, its role being theoretically limited to providing disinterested advice and, under certain conditions, financial aid. According to the law of 1917, the nation had a solemn obligation to “assume the cost, partial or total, of the upkeep and the education necessary for the normal development of the Ward.” In practical terms, this mission statement meant providing subventions for upkeep until the child turned thirteen, at which time he or she could remain in school and continue to receive the subventions in addition to supplemental ones to help defray the costs of education until the age of eighteen. If the Ward chose to leave school, the subventions for upkeep came to an end, but others were available to help with apprenticeship. Any assistance provided by the ONPN was supposed to be based on the specific needs of any given family,⁶³ which differentiated it from the pensions provided to widows and orphans, which were due to rich and poor alike.⁶⁴

1890-1920 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 111-112; Michelle Perrot, “Sortir,” in *Histoire des femmes. 4. Le XIXe siècle*, ed. Geneviève Fraisse and Michelle Perrot (Paris: Plon, 1991), 468-474.

62. A widow’s legal authority was particularly marked when it came to her rights over her children. The Civil Code gave a husband the final word on everything regarding the upbringing and education of his children: if his wife disagreed with him, she had no legal recourse. However, once the husband died, the widow acquired the absolute right, in practice if perhaps not in theory, to govern her children’s persons and their property. The law gave a widow two great rights that belonged exclusively to the husband while he was alive: paternal authority (*puissance paternelle*) and legal guardianship (*tutelle*): the two rights were quite distinct, and a widow could be deprived of one but preserve the others. In addition, the Civil Code also gave a widow the right of correction, guardianship and education over her children. Pierre Lissillour, *Droits des veuves sur la personne de leurs enfants: Thèse pour le Doctorat* (Paris: Librairie de la Société du recueil général des lois et des arrêts, 1902), 31, 33, 53. In spite of a widow’s new-found rights over her children, the power of her husband could extend beyond the grave, albeit in an ineffectual fashion. Article 391 of the Civil Code gave a husband the right to appoint a council to advise his wife in regards to the guardianship of the children, but it ultimately had no real power and had to bow to the widow’s will. In fact, legal commentators agreed that it was extremely rare for a husband to appoint such a council, suggesting that most men considered their wives capable of raising their children. *Ibid.*, 135, 165. For an interesting discussion of the gendered aspects of paternal authority in the Code Civil, see Sylvia Schafer, *Children in Moral Danger and the Problem of Government in Third Republic France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 33-36.

63. Olivier Faron, *Les enfants du deuil*, 109-110.

64. Indeed, there were important differences in the way that the two laws dealt with orphans. The 1919 law gave orphans certain rights, but only of an indirect nature: children were not entitled to and did not receive pension payments: the premiums designed to help pay for the cost of the orphans’ upkeep were given to their mothers. The law creating the status of Wards of the Nation gave rights to the orphans themselves

In spite of the preponderance of subventions for upkeep, which were initially all-important due to the young age of the Wards (seventy-eight million francs were budgeted for this purpose in 1922), the National Office often reminded the departmental offices that their duties went beyond providing financial aid. In certain cases, they had to show the parents which career path the young Ward should take, orienting the child “according to its aptitudes and to the national interest.” The departmental offices were also responsible for the moral protection of the Wards in their care, which could sometimes lead to the loss of parental rights, although this was a rare occurrence.⁶⁵

By the end of 1919, 300,000 war “orphans” had already been declared Wards, and over a hundred million francs had been distributed to them. The Seine department had by far the most Wards (31,755), while the Ardennes had by far the least (162).⁶⁶ The number of registered Wards increased steadily during the following years, peaking at over 700,000 during the mid and late 1920s before slowly decreasing. The number of Wards receiving subventions was always smaller and peaked in 1923 before decreasing significantly. The annual budget of the ONPN slowly decreased during the same period, holding steady at something close to 150 million francs between 1923 and 1933, although this does not take into account the fluctuating value of the franc.⁶⁷

The responsibilities of the Seine office, located in what was by far the largest urban agglomeration in the country, were enormous: its 1921 budget was 22.3 million francs, 3.6 million francs more than the previous year since a staggering thirty thousand new Wards had been signed up during those twelve months. Subventions for upkeep naturally represented the biggest expenditure since so many Wards were under thirteen years of age (47,000 out of 58,000): these had accounted for nearly three million francs in the first trimester of 1920 alone.⁶⁸ During the second trimester of 1921, subventions for upkeep accounted for 3.26 million francs,

and made it clear that any assistance provided was exclusively for these children. However, this distinction was often a purely theoretical one, a fact that was best illustrated by the subventions for upkeep. This money was intended for the Ward, but since he or she was by definition a child, the money was given to his mother, and the Office, which did not like to interfere in the home life of its charges, simply hoped that she would spend it as she was supposed to.

65. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 9, 41-42, 44. This was no trifling matter, since such a step could lead to the loss of a widow's pension.

66. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 1 (1919), 59.

67. Olivier Faron, *Les enfants du deuil*, 316, 319. Note that Faron's estimate of the number of Wards is based on a 1931 report from the Ministry of the Interior, and that these figures do not always correspond to those found in the *Bulletin* or other ONPN documents.

68. ONPN du département de la Seine, Conseil d'Administration, *Procès verbaux*, 12e séance, (February. 1921) 2, 4.

study subventions for 179,000 francs, apprenticeship subventions for 319,000 francs and medical assistance for 78,000 francs. By the end of the year, the number of Wards in the department had risen to 63,000,⁶⁹ and the figure stood at 70,000 two years later.⁷⁰ The Seine office was responsible for roughly the same number of Wards throughout the 1920s, with a slight majority of children living in Paris itself rather than in the surrounding suburbs. For comparative purposes, the second largest departmental office in the country, that of the Nord, cared for only 33,000 Wards.⁷¹

As was to be expected, the responsibilities of provincial departmental offices were of a different magnitude than those of their Seine counterpart. On 31 December 1923, the office of the nearby Eure et Loir department had 4,091 Wards on the books, 961 of them receiving subventions for upkeep, for a total cost of 178,523 francs (an average of just 185 francs per child). Another 192 received subventions for apprenticeships (42,518 francs), while sixty-five received medical subventions (13,000 francs) and fifty received study subventions (14,477 francs).⁷² In the Basses-Pyrenees department, there were 6,211 Wards in 1924, and over 2,600 of them received subventions for upkeep, for a total of cost of 403,959 francs, which meant that the average subvention was just 155 francs per year.⁷³ The Doubs office had been particularly proactive in terms of propaganda in 1921, but officials believed that the 3,679 Wards in its charge did not quite represent all the children who could benefit from the law.⁷⁴

Regardless of their sizes or importance, departmental offices provided the same services and were motivated by the same sense of obligation towards the orphans of fallen soldiers and the mothers who raised them.

The ONPN: Rhetoric and policies

However, neither this sense of obligation nor the preponderance of women in the hierarchy precluded patronizing or suspicious attitudes towards war widows. The ONPN's leadership had very clear ideas about the organization's mission and duties, and about the way that war widows should make use of the Office. Leaders were always at pains to make it clear

69. Ibid., *14e séance* (November 1921), 3.

70. Ibid., *17e séance*, (January 1923), 2.

71. ONPN du département de la Seine, Section Permanente, *Procès verbaux*, *82e séance* (April 1925), 69.

72. Département de l'Eure et Loir, Office des Pupilles de la Nation, *Rapport annuel (Exercice 1922)* (Chartres: 1924), 4.

73. Office Départemental des Basses Pyrenees, *Rapport annuel (1924)* (Pau: 1925), 4-5.

74. Département du Doubs, Office des Pupilles de la Nation, *Rapport annuel (1921)* (Besancon: 1922), 2.

that the ONPN was not providing charity or welfare, and were no doubt disconcerted to realize that many war widows were less concerned with the unwelcome guidance that the office offered than with the more tangible benefits that came with having their children “adopted.” This attitude did not always sit well with administrators, who often had strong opinions regarding the proper education of orphans and felt that they knew better than the mothers. Nevertheless, most bureaucrats realized that it was necessary to make allowances for the hard life of war widows and were willing to adopt realistic attitudes when it came to contentious areas such as remarriage and work.

Commemorative events organized by the Office all exemplified the aura of *gravitas* and solemnity that hovered about the new government agency, as well as the spirit of generosity and non-partisanship that it sought to convey. They also demonstrated the high expectations of the ONPN as far as war widows and orphans were concerned. During a special ceremony attended by local and foreign dignitaries at the Sorbonne in November of 1919, former Prime Minister and ex-socialist René Viviani stated that of all the laws he had ever helped passed in Parliament, the one creating the Wards of the Nation would forever remain in his memory, since the “generous impulse of a grieving nation towards these poor children whose fathers have fallen for the holy cause, will forever illumine the histories that chronicle it.” Viviani went on to describe the orphans as “the poor little ones who will forever see in their humble abode the photograph of the manly hero who has disappeared.”⁷⁵ Léon Bourgeois, a former solidarist head of government, also spoke about the fallen heroes who had given their lives for a Nation that was now duty-bound to care for their orphans: “we must make sure that not a single one of these children will one day be able to say: “My mother, France, abandoned me when I needed her most.””⁷⁶ The Office clearly intended for the ghosts of the dead to remain present in the lives of orphans and their mothers.

The Grand Rabbi of Paris⁷⁷ continued in the same vein as the those who had spoken before him, reminding the Wards that their very title would serve as a reminder of their departed father and that the nation that had adopted them expected much in return. The rabbi then addressed widows directly:

75. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 1 (1919), 33, 44.

76. *Ibid.*, 44.

77. In keeping with the theme of sacredness emphasized in these speeches, local religious figures had also been invited to speak, evoking a strange and unusual rapprochement between Church and State. The idea was no doubt to give the impression that the *Union sacrée* was still alive and well and that when it came to the Wards of the Nation, the needs of the children took precedence over vulgar partisan questions of political or religious affiliation.

To those of you weeping for the lost companion of your youth, who gaze with terror at the future life with the poor orphans given over to your tender care, this patriotic parchment given to your children will remind you that you will not be alone as you shoulder your heavy maternal burden. Surrounded by general goodwill and sympathy, you will find a helping hand to guide you during the most difficult hours. Regardless of what a painful reminder it may be, do not hesitate to proudly ask that the title of Ward of the Nation be bestowed upon your children, even if you do not think that you will ever have need of assistance. To refuse this honour would be to spit upon it.⁷⁸

The Grand Rabbi's speech exposed the paradoxical dilemma in which widows found themselves vis-a-vis the state: they were either totally neglected or patronizingly supervised by a government apparatus that saw them only as weak women in need of a surrogate male guide.

The principles alluded to in the foregoing speeches were made explicit by the general instructions and admonitions given to local branches of the Office describing the law of 1917:

It is a law of Liberty: the Nation does not want to take the place of children's mothers or of their natural tutors and as such does not infringe upon or limit any of the parents' rights, only adding a measure of protection...It is a law of Fraternity and not of *assistance*—it is made for all children who lost a father on the field of battle, regardless of whether he was rich or poor...the law gives the same title to all these children, regardless of their differences in wealth...It is a law of Mutual Respect—the will of the dead father, or when this is uncertain, the will of the mother, will be strictly adhered to...It is a law of social solidarity and concord—it will exemplify the Sacred Union in the most noble mission of all: the protection and the upbringing of children.

Finally, administrators were admonished to follow this golden rule: "Always stop and ask yourself, before making any decision regarding one of your Wards, what would the father have done if he were still here?"⁷⁹ This text makes it perfectly clear that the ultimate authority when it came to the children under the Office's protection was the will of the *father*, whose patriarchal rule was not ended by death. However, Office leaders had to know full well that insistence on this point was for the sake of appearances only: in most cases there was no way of knowing what the father's will had been, leaving the widow free to do whatever she pleased, even if she had to justify it by claiming that she was merely following her husband's last wishes. Indeed, the above text proclaimed that the Office would never seek to usurp a mother's place. As for the claim that the law was one of fraternity rather than assistance, events would soon put the lie to it, as it became clear that most war widows did see the Office as a source of supplemental assistance.

78. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 1 (1919), 33.

79. Office départementale de l'Oise des Pupilles de la Nation, *À nos correspondants communaux* (Beauvais: 1925), 13-15.

This possibility was a frequent source of worry for leaders of the National Office, whose leaders realized that departmental offices were arriving on the scene at a very difficult moment and had been given instructions that might lead to confusion among certain war widows. Because the separation allocation was insufficient for the needs of many women whose husbands had been mobilized, the government had begun to extend the family bonuses for civil servants to some of these women late in the war. Once widowed, they became ineligible for these bonuses, and certain of them became almost bereft of resources. The credits that were allocated to the ONPN by the government were used to provide these needy families with a more or less regular allocation as a compensation for those that the widows no longer received as mothers of families. It did not take long for the ONPN to conclude that things could not continue in such a fashion, and widows were informed that the Office would no longer be handing out allocations but rather assistance for school, apprenticeship and in case of sickness.⁸⁰

However, this shift in policy was something of a chimera since the same worries about widows using the Office only for purposes of financial aid continued to be voiced during the 1920s. In 1922, certain members of the High Council expressed concern over a government project to increase the child bonus for war widows' pensions from three hundred to five hundred francs. The fear was that such an increase would lead to fewer widows bothering to have their children inscribed as Wards since they would no longer need the money provided by the ONPN, rendering the Office incapable of fulfilling its other roles in guiding children's development and education.⁸¹

By the mid-twenties, departmental offices were arguing that the reason that so many Wards were receiving subventions for upkeep was that only needy families had bothered to have their children adopted. The Haute Marne office claimed that widows only applied for adoption when they had an immediate need for money or financial assistance. Likewise, the Alpes Maritimes office firmly believed that well-off families in the department simply did not bother asking for adoption. Such observations made a mockery of the rhetoric that had surrounded the creation of the ONPN, according to which the title of Ward of the Nation was supposed to be an honour.⁸²

The Office had always tried to avoid the impression that it provided charity or welfare payments and was constantly at pains to stress the great difference that existed between the

80. ONPN, Conseil Supérieur, *Procès verbaux, 1ère session*, July 1930, 29; ONPN, *Bulletin* no 1 (1919), 13.

81. ONPN, Conseil Supérieur, *Procès verbaux, 1ère session*, 1922, 25.

82. ONPN, *Bulletin*, no. 15, 39.

Wards of the Nation and the orphans of the Assistance Publique. Even as the law was being hammered out in 1916, a parliamentary report forcefully argued that “*for moral reasons obvious for all who have eyes to see*, it is quite impossible that the sons of deceased veterans should be confused on a legal level with “found children” or “morally abandoned” ones.”⁸³ This fact did not always register with potential applicants, and local offices had to devote a good deal of time to enlightening public opinion on this topic. During the ONPN’s early days, for example, the departmental office of Calvados could claim that its principal task letting families know their rights and allaying any undue concerns on their part. The correspondents took the time to explain to parents that they did not lose any authority over their children if they were named Wards, that being a Ward did not necessarily mean being financially assisted, and that adoption should in no way be considered shameful.⁸⁴

The hesitation on the part of senior figures in the National Office to provide war widows with subventions also stemmed from concerns that these women might come to rely too much on such assistance. The permanent subvention for upkeep struck ONPN leaders as being exceptional, a special measure that should be limited to those few cases where there was a real long-term lack of resources. These men and women attached far more importance to temporary, exceptional subventions destined to compensate for a momentary shortfall in resources caused by illness, unemployment and other circumstances that might compromise the well-being of the Wards. According to this line of thought, mothers should not become accustomed to receiving a complement to their pension from the ONPN, although they should feel confident that the Office would be there to help if unexpected difficulties arose.⁸⁵ These concerns demonstrated the patronizing and condescending attitude of many people in the National Office, who feared that war widows would become idle parasites if given too much help. Such contempt was often mingled with an awareness that the state’s ability to assist people remained limited. In 1920, a member of the ONPN’s High Council spoke out in favour of giving each Ward a savings bank-

83. Quoted in Olivier Faron, *Les enfants du deuil*, 112. Sylvia Schafer, in her definitive work on the subject, explains that the “moral abandonment” (*abandon moral*) of children was a fluid concept that had first been used sometime around 1880 to describe “parents’ general failure to provide a moral upbringing.” The term remained ambiguous even after it was used in the 1889 law on the divestiture of paternal authority, since it referred to something that could not be apprehended as easily as material neglect or physical abuse. While the state strove to protect such children, it did so largely because it saw in them future generations of criminals and deviants. It is therefore understandable that the ONPN did not want Wards of the Nation to be mistaken for such children. Sylvia Schafer, *Children in Moral Danger*, 3-5.

84. Département du Calvados, ONPN, *Les sections cantonales: leurs attributions et leur rôle, circulaire du 25 novembre 1918*. 3, 5 [BDIC O 4574].

85. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 4, 41.

book, arguing that this would make children think of saving for the future and becoming self-sufficient:

When we accustom people to expect everything from others without having to do anything themselves, we create a nation of beggars. This is not what we need to do. We must make people believe that they can make a situation for themselves, without waiting for everything they want to be handed over to them by that all-powerful god they call the state, who is in fact much less powerful than they think.⁸⁶

This observation is tinged with a certain class prejudice that was common among the ONPN's leaders, who assumed that certain widows needed more money than others since they and their children were accustomed to a certain way of life. The president of the Calvados departmental office reminded correspondents that when it came to assigning a subvention for upkeep, "insufficient resources" did not necessarily mean indigence: the goal was, inasmuch as possible, to ensure that the upbringing of each Ward was the same as it would have been were the father still alive. Thus, not only did the correspondent have to consider the resources of the family, but also the "position that it occupied" while the husband was still alive.⁸⁷ In this sense, the Office resembled the charities that aided war widows (see Chapter 3), and these women had to accept the fact that any help that they could expect, whether of a public or private nature, would not be based solely on their most basic material needs. The state made this perfectly clear in 1919 when it decided to base the pensions of war victims partly on rank.

The paternalistic and patronizing bias of the ONPN could also be seen very clearly in its members' attitudes regarding Wards' education. In 1923, certain individuals in the Seine office tried to argue that the ONPN should exert greater authority in order to make sure that its Wards were on a suitable academic path. One member used the example of a child who had received very mediocre grades throughout his academic life, but was nevertheless currently taking Latin lessons. Furthermore, his mother had bluntly admitted that she would be taking him out of school "in a couple of years' time," which meant that the Latin lessons were a complete waste of time. Another member added that all too often widows invoked the memory of their dead husbands and hypocritically claimed that the father would have wanted his son to go to the *lycée*. However, others on the council felt that hasty judgments should be avoided and that Wards like the boy in question should be given a chance to prove themselves since it sometimes took a while to get used to the academic environment and achieve satisfactory results. The debate concluded on a note of compromise when it was decided that the Office should try to

86. ONPN, Conseil Supérieur, *Procès verbaux, deuxième session*, 1920, 57.

87. Département du Calvados, ODPN, *Répartition des subventions, circulaire du 15 décembre 1919*, 2, 4.

guide families when it came to educational choices, but could not override these once they were made.⁸⁸ This gracious concession was no more than an acknowledgement of the fact that legally, the Office had no real power over the widow, regardless of any concerns about her faculties of judgement.⁸⁹

Again, the patronizing, condescending attitude of the ONPN towards war widows is strangely reminiscent of charities run by bourgeois women who often thought very little of their working-class charges' capacity for rational thought. In Chapter 3 we will see how charities created to help war widows also distrusted their charges and felt the need to offer them guidance at all times lest they follow their natural inclinations and do something foolish that would harm themselves and their child. In this respect, there was little difference between the traditional charitable outlook and that of the emergent welfare apparatuses.

The question of work was a contentious one for members of the ONPN at both the national and local level. An inadequate pension meant that employment was a necessity for most war widows. In general, the national leadership was ready to recognize this and criticized departmental offices for placing too much emphasis on a widow's salary when deciding whether or not to provide her children with subventions. The national administration argued that one had to keep in mind that a salary did not represent net earnings, since outside work inevitably led to increased expenditures on the widow's part (transportation, food, paying someone to watch the children). According to the ONPN,

both morality and social necessity dictate that we should encourage widows to work so that they might improve the lot of their children in the here and now and prepare for the future...it would be manifestly unjust to consider a widow's painful work as a black mark against her and to give our subventions for upkeep the appearance of rewards for laziness.

The departmental offices were therefore asked to consider such working widows as having an extra child for purposes of determining what level of subvention was called for.⁹⁰

Local offices generally followed these guidelines, although a certain amount of ambivalence was sometimes noticeable. According to the president of the Calvados office, in most cases war widows had no problem finding work, and their salaries combined with their

88. ONPN du département de la Seine, Conseil d'Administration, *Procès verbaux*, 22e séance, November 1923, 4-6.

89. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 9, 48, 51. Certain senior figures in the National Office had a very low opinion of women and considered them incapable of effectively acting as heads of their families. One of these individuals bluntly stated that widows were often not suited to being their children's tutor, since they were often young and inexperienced.

90. *Ibid.*, no. 15, 75.

pensions were sufficient for meeting a family's basic needs. The president therefore felt that regular subventions should be reserved for a few select cases, such as large families, because then

the interest of the family as well as that of society requires that a mother devote herself first and foremost to the care and education of her children. The humble salary that she could earn by working away from home could not compensate for the harm that her absence from the hearth will do to her children. Thus, when a mother wholeheartedly devotes herself to her duty, we should not hesitate to provide her with the means to do so as efficiently as possible.

The president admitted that it could be very difficult to know to what degree the office should encourage widowed mothers to find remunerated work. For some of them the need for such activity came as a shock; however, it was impossible for the Office to undo the damage of the war and bring the dead back to life, and the hard reality was that there was a labour shortage in France. However, tact and delicacy were never to be forgotten, and representatives of the office were told to never make the widow believe that she was being forced to work.⁹¹

In order to "encourage" widows to work, the president suggested that the rules could be bent a little in order to provide some added incentive. Correspondents were told to consider the income earned from outside work to be a little lower than it really was and continue providing at least small subventions that would allow such women to buy a few extras once in a while, the president considering such measures to be both "efficient" and humane. In a *truly* humane moment, the president addressed the issue of outwork and asked everyone to extend special considerations to widows who performed such work when it came to evaluating how much money they could bring in.⁹²

Opinions regarding remarried war widows varied, with some departmental offices looking askance at such women when they asked for continued subventions, while others were more lenient. In 1921, one member of the Seine departmental office claimed that in the 10th arrondissement of Paris which he was responsible for, a certain number of widows had asked for an increase in their subvention because they were getting remarried. Many of his fellow members angrily replied that this was an example of a gross abuse of the Office's kindness: remarriages should on the contrary have entailed *lower* subventions, since there would now be a male breadwinner to help pay the bills (the fact that he might be bringing children of his own to

91. Département du Calvados, ODPN, *Répartition des subventions, circulaire du 15 décembre 1919*, 5. Note that this incitement to work took place when the French economy was strong. Although I was unable to find out a great deal about the ONPN during the 1930s, it seems likely that its leaders were singing quite a different tune.

92. *Ibid.*, 6.

the marriage was not mentioned). Another member took this opportunity to point out that some widows failed to mention that they had gotten remarried, presumably because they feared just such a sanction. It was suggested that someone should regularly check with the Marriage Bureau in each City Hall to make sure that none of the Office's widows had gotten remarried on the sly.⁹³ Such condemnation was not universal, however, and the departmental office of the Doubs insisted that remarriage did not automatically entail the suppression of a Ward's subvention: "When a widow, very needy, unites her poverty to another poverty, the subventions continue as before."⁹⁴ This was as vexed an issue for administrators as it had been for law-makers, and there was little in the way of agreement.

In spite of their frequently overbearing and condescending attitudes, members of the National Office seemed genuinely concerned about the women and children in their care. The ONPN's leaders were quite sincere in their desire to have as many war orphans as possible be recognized as Wards of the Nation. This wish was often frustrated by obstacles and delays that were thrown in the paths of widows at the local level, and the National Office did its best to help. In 1919, the Office expressed concern over the fact that a family council theoretically had to approve "adoptions" of Wards of the Nation, and that this could be a long, drawn-out process. The National Office sent out a reminder that the Minister of Justice had recently stated that this approval was not required and that excessive red tape should not "diminish the extent of a law that strengthens social solidarity and is clearly in the national interest." The National Office also reminded its members that an appeal could be lodged if a tribunal rejected a request for adoption, and congratulated the departmental office in Toulouse for hiring a lawyer to help widows with such appeals, an experiment that had turned out to be quite successful.⁹⁵

The ONPN's activity diminished somewhat during the 1930s, but there was still much demand for its services, and leaders continued to show genuine concern with the well-being of widows and orphans. In 1931, several members of the High Council were worried about the fate of the families of soldiers who were only now dying as a result of wartime injuries. They were particularly critical about the slow disappearance of subventions for upkeep, despite the important number of requests for adoption, which were almost always accompanied by demands for subventions. As one member put it: "Alas! They are many wounded veterans who are dying

93. ONPN du département de la Seine, Section Permanente, *Procès verbaux*, 43e séance (Dec. 1921), 28.

94. Département du Doubs, Office des Pupilles de la Nation, *Rapport Annuel (1921)* (Besancon: 1922), 5.

95. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 1 (1919), 14-21 *passim*.

these days, often leaving us with many children, and I have the habit of giving the following answer when I am asked the age of our youngest Ward: “He has not yet been born.”” He felt that the financial needs of the new young Wards were greater than ever before, and was particularly worried by the fact that tribunals often took a long time to adopt children of veterans who had recently died of tuberculosis. Administrative delays could result in delays of up to a year, at a period when a widow and her children were often in dire need of material help.⁹⁶

Another member of the High Council, a Mrs. Callarec, reminded her fellow councillors that older widows also faced grave difficulties. She claimed that many who worked at the cantonal level like herself felt that “real” war orphans (those whose fathers had been killed during the war and who had been adopted in 1917 or shortly thereafter) had not always received the help to which they had been entitled because the Office had been so disorganized at the time. As a result, these young boys and girls were often in sad shape: the mother who had raised them as best she could had not always been able to feed them adequately, and many of them were now feeling the effects of such malnourishment and were having to give up their studies. According to Callarec, the suppression of the subvention for upkeep once a child turned thirteen was very harmful, leaving the widow with nothing more than her pension. She stated that a war widow’s budget was seven and a half francs for day, and that her expenses were as follows:

- 1 franc for rent (“and that doesn’t get you a palace”)
- 1 franc for bread
- 1 franc for meat (“she certainly won’t be eating beefsteak!”)
- 1 franc for cheese and milk
- half a franc for upkeep and shoes
- half a franc for upkeep of the house or apartment
- half a franc for taxes and other fees or charges
- half a franc for heating, light, etc.
- half a franc for vegetables

This grim tally meant that there was absolutely nothing left over to plan ahead for illness. This miserable hand-to-mouth existence struck Callarec as the perfect way to contract tuberculosis. She knew that a few widows worked, and argued that these women were also very worthy of help since they had to perform all the tasks of a mother and housewife once they got home late in the evening, doing everything that an industrious housekeeper barely managed to get done during a full day’s work.⁹⁷

Mrs. Callarec’s concerns were probably never addressed before the government’s

96. ONPN, Conseil Supérieur, *Procès verbaux, première session*, 1931, 24-25, 27-29, 33.

97. *Ibid.*, 42-44. The assumption that many, and perhaps most, war widows did not work and relied solely on the pension seems quite improbable.

budgetary difficulties resulted in the National Office slashing expenditures across the board in 1933 and 1934. The annual budget suffered a shortfall of 15% in 1933, and departmental offices were asked to “tighten their belts as much as possible,” to review all subventions and to consider eliminating those that were too small to be of any real value.⁹⁸ Under these conditions, it is certain that even more war widows and orphans had to suffer from inadequate subventions from the ONPN.

Nevertheless, the indignation and empathy exhibited by Callarec and certain of her colleagues reveal the paradoxical nature of the ONPN. The National Office managed to combine a paternalistic and patronizing attitude towards its charges with a genuine desire to help them, although the rhetoric surrounding the Office gave the impression that children were really the objects of that solicitude. The attitude of certain administrators serves only to reinforce this impression: for example, when it came to the issue of widows and work, many members of the Office ignored the women’s own wishes, which were less important than their maternal duties and the needs of the French economy. However, it was equally clear that many figures in the ONPN, such as Mrs. Callarec, were genuinely concerned about war widows as people.

The ONPN as Centralized Bureaucracy

In spite of these little human touches, the National Office was in many ways typical of a massive government bureaucracy, particularly when it came to the question of centralization, foreshadowing the rise of the French welfare state.⁹⁹ As soon as it came into being, the National Office strove to impose its will unto sometimes recalcitrant departmental and cantonal offices, the High Council being determined to have all offices follow uniform guidelines that applied across the country regardless of regional variations. This top-down control was sometimes used to force local offices to be more generous, but the zeal for conformity often appears quite unreasonable in light of the great differences that existed between different departments, whether in terms of the cost of living or employment patterns. Members of the High Council understood that local officials were apt to display favouritism towards applicants and behave in other unjust

98. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 34 (June 1933), 9.

99. Recent literature on the rise of the French welfare state has posited that centralization and national control are principally products of the interwar period. Douglas Ashford, *The Emergence of the Welfare States* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 137-138; Tim Smith, *Creating the Welfare State in France*, 9-13. Indeed, for Smith the battle between the local and the national is part and parcel of the struggle between private charity and public welfare. Such an interpretation may seem counterintuitive since one automatically tends to think of France as already having been a highly centralized state. See Judith F. Stone, *The Search for Social Peace: Reform Legislation in France, 1890-1914* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), 9-11.

and inefficient ways, but failed to appreciate that these individuals were better placed than they to determine the needs of the war widows and orphans in their departments.

As early as 1919, the National Office reminded the departmental offices of policy, particularly regarding the fact that upkeep subventions for Wards should be attributed on the basis of need, and that it was against both the spirit and the letter of the law for each orphan to receive the same sum regardless of his or her circumstances. To underscore this point, the President explained that “it is necessary for all of us to be absolutely clear on the following point: the departmental office is not a simple relief fund (*caisse de secours*), but a public establishment responsible for the education of the Wards in order to make them into productive and responsible citizens.” He insisted that local offices had to make it perfectly clear to widows that the ONPN would only provide them with subventions if it was deemed necessary for the well-being of the orphan.¹⁰⁰

A few years later, the Office leaders in Paris concluded that far too many cantonal offices were still doing a very lacklustre job and that departmental offices were becoming increasingly frustrated with this. The tendency to comply with all requests for financial assistance without asking for explanations or proof of need, presumably to avoid making enemies in the neighbourhood or community, was particularly worrying. The National Office therefore asked the departmental offices to establish individual budgets in order to distribute subventions in a more just and efficient fashion.¹⁰¹

A few weeks after this gentle reminder, the secretary-general went on a little inspection tour across the country to see how the departmental offices were getting along, and the results were mixed. He was often pleased by local efforts, such as those in the Bouches-du-Rhône, but many problems remained elsewhere. The National Office had recently ordered the departmental offices to send out questionnaires to the widows in their jurisdiction so that they could better determine their real needs, but these often came back with missing or incorrect information. The secretary-general was aware of one widow who owned two hectares of land and some cattle, but who had stated on the questionnaire that her pension was her only source of income. The problem in these cases was that it was extremely difficult to ascertain whether such women were telling the truth (unless they were civil servants), and the secretary-general admitted that many departmental offices simply did not have the resources to verify the applicants' claims.¹⁰²

100. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 1 (1919), 12-14.

101. *Ibid.*, no. 6, 5, 7.

102. *Ibid.*, 20-26.

Ultimately, however, the great conflict between the National Office and its departmental and cantonal offices revolved around the number and size of subventions. The High Council had a very clear idea of its mission and duties, and this clarity of purpose went so far as to believe that the average subvention for upkeep should work out to 300 francs per Ward. Council members were displeased when this target was not met, since this made it very difficult for them to establish budgets. Thus, the Office found itself in an awkward position in 1921 when it asked the budget committee for a credit of 124 million francs for subventions, despite the fact that it had spent only seventy million the year before (meaning that each Ward had received only 221 francs). This shortcoming was blamed on the supposedly incompetent cantonal offices, whose laxity made it impossible for the departmental offices to accurately predict how many local Wards would need subventions or how large these would be.¹⁰³

Furthermore, the High Council noticed that there were many troubling variations from one department to another. Certain departmental offices responded, reasonably enough, that they had to continue handing out an important number of large subventions because of local economic conditions, such as the unemployment crises in the Doubs and Savoie departments. While the central administration seemed willing to grudgingly yield to this logic, a further problem was that sometimes two neighbouring offices in which the same economic climate prevailed had very different policies, such as the office in Ille et Vilaine, which gave subventions to 80% of its Wards while the figure next door in the Mayenne office was closer to 30%.¹⁰⁴

This suggested another problem, offices that were not giving out enough subventions, often because the local personnel assumed that Paris wanted them to spend as little money as possible. Such was the case in the Hautes Alpes, where only 9% of the registered Wards received subventions. The national office reserved special criticism for the Meurthe et Moselle office, which was described as an out and out “mess” (only 5% of its Wards received aid of any sort), and which supposedly only concerned itself with widows who asked for help. This office was held up as an example of the minority that needlessly worried that mothers might come to rely too much on the state. The National Office’s leaders believed that many war widows in the department were simply unaware of their rights and therefore could not ask for help.¹⁰⁵

103. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 7, 15.

104. *Ibid.*, 18, 21-22.

105. *Ibid.*, 21, 23, 43. The National Office stated that it was certainly opposed to any sort of waste, but was nevertheless struck by the extreme parsimony displayed by certain offices: one had to keep in mind that this money was not public welfare or charity, but a sacred debt. In spite of these pious sentiments, the fact is that certain members of the High Council had expressed similar concerns about war widows becoming too dependent on government hand-outs less than a year before.

Trying to drive their point home, central administrators used the example of a widow in the Maine et Loire department who had nothing but her and her son's pension to live on—her health was poor and she could not work on a regular basis. She made do with 1,100 francs a year, never having received the subventions for upkeep that she had asked the local office for. One day, her child fell gravely ill and required an operation that ended up costing one thousand francs. She contacted the departmental office and was awarded a one-time payment of four hundred francs, but “one has to wonder with what the poor woman can possibly pay the remainder of her debt.” According to angry representatives of the National Office, the departmental staff should clearly have paid for all the medical fees *and* awarded the widow a permanent and fairly hefty upkeep subvention.¹⁰⁶

Many departmental offices during the 1920s were having difficulty imposing the uniformity that the leadership in Paris wanted. In the Eure and Loire, each case brought to the departmental office's attention generated the necessary inquiries, including the advice of a local correspondent and the cantonal office. Notifications of the departmental office's decisions went through the local commune's mayor, who was therefore kept apprised of the subventions that the locals were getting. The payments, issued each trimester, were only handed over if the correspondent was presented with an attestation establishing that the money was being used for its intended purpose. All of this would seem to indicate an efficient, well-organized departmental office that had the situation well in hand. However, there was great concern during the early 1920s about the fact that demands for upkeep subventions had recently been pouring in and were consuming a larger percentage of the budget than ever before. According to the departmental office, this was due to the fact that the correspondents gave some sort of assistance, no matter how trivial and insignificant, to almost everyone who asked in order to escape the constant barrage of requests. Once granted, these subventions were then essentially automatically renewed every year until the Ward reached thirteen years of age. Although departmental office leaders were unhappy with this situation (in part because they were being pressured by the National Office in Paris to change their ways), no amount of written or verbal instructions had so far managed to bring such practices to an end.¹⁰⁷

When it came to subventions, the departmental office in the Doubs insisted that it carefully followed national guidelines, considering each case on its individual merits. Administrators admitted that during the early days, when the credits that came in from Paris had

106. ONPN, *Bulletin*, no. 7, 42.

107. Département de l'Eure et Loire, Office des Pupilles de la Nation, *Rapport Annuel (Exercice 1922)* (Chartres: 1924), 4, 6.

exceeded their needs, they had been overly generous with their subventions for upkeep, partly because they had known so little about the Wards in their care. The National Office's instructions to review all subventions in 1920 had naturally entailed a great deal of work, and the process had taken many months. Once everything was said and done, however, the departmental office had eliminated nearly five-hundred subventions for upkeep that were deemed unnecessary, which saved eighty-four thousand francs a year. The measure seemed even more reasonable to the administrators in hindsight due to the fact that very few widows had complained or tried to lodge an appeal.¹⁰⁸ In spite of the recent reviews and cuts, however, the Doubs office was still plagued by a certain degree of inefficiency thanks to the local correspondents, and the result was an unacceptable number of subventions. The departmental president felt that it was necessary to reissue the standard reminders to the correspondents regarding the necessity to provide specific, detailed information on each case along with one's honest opinion. The men and women on the ground had to bear in mind that the National Office was pushing for the suppression of small and "useless" subventions for upkeep.¹⁰⁹

Despite these sporadic difficulties in certain parts of the country, by 1922 the National Office was confidently predicting that everything would be soon be running smoothly and that the departmental offices now understood what was expected of them. In particular, they now supposedly realized that they should feel free to provide temporary subventions when there was a real need, so that mothers would have the sentiment that these offices, while they should not be mistaken for providers of welfare, could become a sort of insurance against the vicissitudes of life.¹¹⁰ ONPN leaders were happy to observe that on average, most departments now provided 40% to 60% of local Wards with subventions for upkeep, a percentage that was deemed perfectly reasonable. The numbers in a few departments were still considered excessive, with the Finistère, the Haut-Rhin and the Haute-Savoie being singled out for criticism because over 80% of Wards in those areas received subventions. The finger was also pointed at the Seine department, where 85% of the Wards received subventions for upkeep, a figure that was considered far too high even taking into account the cost of living in the capital. All in all,

108. Département du Doubs, Office des Pupilles de la Nation, *Rapport Annuel (1921)* (Besançon: 1922), 2-5.

109. ONPN du Doubs. *Réunion des présidents et secrétaires des sections cantonales le 28 octobre 1923 à Besançon*, 3-6.

110. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 9, 37-38. The National Office's criticisms of departmental and cantonal offices briefly led to some unfortunate misunderstandings as certain local offices believed that the High Council wanted to cut costs by any means possible and therefore refused to provide a subvention to any widow with only one child. The National Office quickly took steps to correct this problem.

however, the High Council was quite pleased since the average subvention for each Ward was very close to the magical number of three hundred francs.¹¹¹

In spite of such optimism, local variations did not correct themselves as quickly as the High Council had hoped. Certain departmental offices tried to hold out as long as possible, their personnel arguing that special local circumstances needed to be taken into account. Representatives from the Pas de Calais office argued that the department had been ravaged under German occupation and that several more years would be needed before the recovery was complete. Their colleagues in the Meuse office took a similar stance, claiming that the war had rendered a great deal of farmland unusable, meaning that many widows had a difficult time making ends meet. Members of the Savoie office bluntly stated that the department had always been poor, and that there were many impoverished peasant families living on mountainous land who were unable to provide for their children. Corsican administrators claimed to be in a unique situation, with the island's high rate of malaria requiring expensive vacation colonies to remove Wards from danger. In the Alpes Maritimes, office leaders argued that their department also represented a unique case, the tourist-dependent economy resulting in very high unemployment rates during the off-season.¹¹²

When it came to imposing national standards on departmental offices, the Seine was particularly problematic because of its size and the exceptionally high cost of living. In May of 1920, the Seine office's administrative council tried to determine exactly how much money should be included in a subvention for upkeep, in part because the National Office wanted some estimates in this regard. The council eventually agreed upon six francs per day as an "average" figure that could be sent to the National Office in order to pacify the bureaucrats.¹¹³ Since six francs a day meant over 2,000 francs a year, it is safe to assume that members of the High Council were unamused by this early estimate.¹¹⁴

In 1922, members of the High Council expressed particular concern over the Seine office's tendency to provide the great majority of Wards (55,000 out of 65,000) with subventions. The Council decided that the secretary-general should visit this office and seek

111. Ibid., no. 10, 7.

112. Ibid., no. 15 (1925), 40.

113. ONPN du département de la Seine, Conseil d'Administration, *Procès verbaux, 9e séance*, May 1920, 3-6.

114. Figures for 1921 show that the average subvention for upkeep provided to Wards living in Paris was actually just over 250 francs. ONPN du département de la Seine, *Exercice 1921* [Office National des Anciens Combattants, Paris].

some explanations for these startling numbers.¹¹⁵ Reporting back a few months later, the secretary-general informed the Council that the problem was due in part to the fact that it was particularly difficult to find disinterested individuals to take up responsible posts in the popular working-class neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Paris. Added to this was the large population of the department, which had initially made it impossible to check up on all the requests that had come flooding in, and so authority had been granted to the local sections to hand out subventions as they saw fit. The secretary-general believed that this procedure had resulted in a large number of families who could have gotten along perfectly well without any financial assistance receiving subventions and helped explain why 85% of the Wards in the Seine department received such aid (compared to 55% in the rest of the country).¹¹⁶

As the departmental office became more organized, the number of subventions handed out in the Seine diminished steadily, but not quickly enough to completely satisfy the secretary-general: over forty-eight thousand Wards were still receiving them in March 1923. However, he ultimately decided that lenience might be best, in part because every local administrator argued that having orphans adopted was far easier in the countryside, where everyone knew everyone else and a sentiment of community prevailed. In Paris, however, the administrators claimed that people lived their lives in a more isolated fashion and that a widow might shut her door to the ONPN forever if there was no tangible incentive.¹¹⁷ That same year, the Seine departmental office admitted that most subventions were indeed authorized by the cantonal sections, including those that involved less than thirty francs a month for upkeep. Over fifty thousand requests for such subventions had been received during the previous year, and it was of course impossible for the central departmental office to review them all. However, administrators concluded that this system was working well,¹¹⁸ and the slowly shrinking budget of the Seine office (see above) suggests that the situation was under control.

The nature of the relationship between the national administration and departmental offices during the late 1920s is uncertain, but the beginning of financial difficulties shortly after 1930 indicate that everyone was still not seeing eye to eye. Members of the High Council remarked in 1931 that, although the number of subventions for upkeep was naturally decreasing as more and more Wards reached the age of thirteen, too many were still being handed out by

115. ONPN, Conseil Supérieur, *Procès verbaux*, 2e session, 1922, 59.

116. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 14, 66.

117. *Ibid.*, 66-67.

118. ONPN du département de la Seine, Conseil d'Administration, *Procès verbaux*, 16e séance, July 1922, 10. In Paris, the cantonal office covered a single *arrondissement*.

the departmental offices, and that most of these were too small to be of any real help. The National Office reminded departmental offices that if a widow required temporary assistance (for example if she became unemployed), she should be awarded an exceptional aid package that was only valid for a certain fixed period.¹¹⁹ While the High Council had certainly managed to bring the departmental offices under control by the time the ONPN ceased to exist as an independent entity in 1933,¹²⁰ tension remained between the Paris-based leadership on one hand and the cantonal offices and local correspondents on the other.

Because so little information is available about the women and children that the National Office was responsible for, it is impossible to determine which side was “right” in these disputes. Nevertheless, the High Council’s obsessive insistence on uniformity throughout the country and failure to take into account local variations certainly strikes one as both bizarre and unjust. Likewise, the Council’s belief that small subventions were useless was illogical. For a widow trying to support herself and raise her children with the earnings of her poorly-remunerated work and her pension, a few francs a month could well have made the difference between self-sufficiency and indigence. We have seen this previously with the small monthly payments that the capital’s Assistance Publique had been handing out prior to the war and which helped to tide over widows earning poverty wages as home workers. Furthermore, the local representatives of the ONPN, who dealt directly with these women, were more qualified to make such judgements than civil servants in the capital. The fact that such autonomy did not sit well with the Jacobin centralism of the High Council was a poor reason to condone the resulting injustice and inefficiency.

Good Mothers and Bad Mothers

Local representatives of the National Office had much more of a say when it came to determining who was a worthy recipient of the ONPN’s subsidies. While the High Council may have been able to browbeat local offices regarding the total amount of money handed out, the large number of Wards in the ONPN’s care meant that departmental administrators did not have to worry about their decisions regarding membership being second-guessed. These issues usually revolved around questions of morality: as the rhetoric bandied about during the Office’s early

119. ONPN, *Bulletin* no. 30 (June 1931), 18.

120. The ONPN fused with the National Office of Veterans (Office National des Anciens Combattants, ONAC), the government agency responsible for providing pension payments and other services to veterans. The fusion came about after long discussions, and was welcomed by both groups since it promised important savings and simply seemed more rational. Olivier Faron, *Les enfants du deuil*, 244.

days suggests (see above), there was a tacit expectation that the war widow who received subsidies for her children was to have irreproachable morals, which served as an indication that she was a good mother who would spend the money wisely.

A sampling of the ONPN's files¹²¹ suggests that most of the widows who applied for subventions from the ONPN were from the working class, and most seem to have had at least three children, which no doubt left them in a precarious position. An examination of these records likewise sheds light on the life of these women, some of whom naturally fell short of the lofty standards that the Office theoretically demanded of them. Nevertheless, local administrators were usually willing to overlook any behaviour that did not directly harm the children themselves.¹²²

The departmental offices investigated each widow that applied for subventions, carefully calculating the amount of money that family members brought in and determining how much assistance the ONPN (or, after 1933, the ONAC) should provide. These investigations reveal the difficult situations in which these widows found themselves, and hint at the importance that their perceived morality played in determining whether or not the office helped them. Widow Charbonneau only decided to have her children "adopted" by the office about a year after her husband, who had been left an invalid by a wartime wound, died. Working as a hairdresser, she earned a very humble living; the eldest daughter, seventeen years old, was apprenticed as a hairdresser but was not yet making any money; the son, fourteen, was an apprentice mechanic who earned a small salary of his own. The mother's military pension provided the family with less money than her son's job, although this was significantly increased by the premiums for

121. The Parisian branch of the Office National des Anciens Combattants destroyed all its files pertaining to the Wards of the Nation from the Great War some time ago, making it difficult to learn a great deal about war widows in the capital and its closest suburbs. Most such files were also destroyed at the Versailles office (which had an unusually rich inventory due to the fact that it had been the prefecture of the populous Seine et Oise department prior to the 1960s), although a few have amazingly survived. The following is based on these residues, a statistically insignificant sampling numbering less than a hundred files, most of them from the 1930s.

122. The French government was apparently more lenient in this regard than its counterpart across the Channel. The British Ministry of Pensions saw war widows as "custodians of the dead soldiers' memory" who had to live up to the supposedly heroic examples that their husbands had set: failure to do so resulted in termination of the pension. This left such women highly vulnerable to vengeful individuals who could cause them great hardship with false accusations. Over forty thousand investigations were conducted by the Ministry between 1915 and 1920 to determine the moral worthiness of war widows who had been denounced: about half of them satisfied the criteria for pensions, which were finally awarded after considerable delay and anguish. Not surprisingly, working-class widows were far more likely to be investigated in this fashion than middle-class ones. Janis Lomas, "Delicate Duties," 131-132, 138. The ONPN's relative leniency is interesting in light of the fact that French courts sometimes seemed all too willing to take children away from widowed mothers. Sylvia Schafer, *Children in Moral Danger*, 129.

children. Finally, social aid for numerous families accounted for a little extra income each month, and all this just barely allowed the family to get by. Originally the mother asked only for an apprenticeship subvention for her daughter, but after her son became unemployed, she asked for more substantial assistance. Considering the Charbonneau family to be “worthy of interest,” the Versailles Office decided to provide them with subventions.¹²³

We find widow Juishomme living in the village of Chaville with her five children between the ages of three and seventeen. She applied for adoption and financial assistance over a year and a half after her husband passed away, the delay suggesting that the family had some personal savings to fall back on (they did own their house). However, it was not long before the mother became unable to care for her children with her paltry salary as a manufacturer of ready-to-wear clothing. Juishomme also had to care for her eighty-one-year-old mother, and only her oldest child managed to work sporadically. The widow’s war pension combined with social assistance for numerous families was insufficient to meet her needs and those of her children. The Office decided that a subvention was necessary for this household, which was deemed to be “very interesting.”¹²⁴

The Versailles office, like its counterparts across France, was also responsible for the moral welfare of the orphans in its care, and occasionally had to ascertain whether their mothers were suitable parents or should be stripped of their paternal powers and have their children taken from them. Not surprisingly, the Office’s files reveal that these situations were often ambiguous and the truth difficult to determine, in which case the administrators preferred to do nothing and leave the children with their mother. The uncertainty surrounding the somewhat tawdry story of one widow Lemaire and her children exemplifies this tendency and suggests how difficult the ONPN’s task was in this regard, when decisions had to be based on mutually contradictory testimonies. A complaint reached the Versailles Office in 1932 that Lemaire, who lived in the working-class suburb of Montrouge, regularly abused her four children when intoxicated. The letter went on to claim that Lemaire was particularly cruel towards little Robert, who was already a sickly child, and that she had even made two of her children sleep outside during the previous year.¹²⁵

Deciding that an investigation was called for, the office sent policemen to Montrouge to determine the truth of the allegations. The officers found two more neighbours willing to

123. Office National des Anciens Combattants, Versailles. “Compte de tutelle Charbonneau”, nos. 30,783 and 30,787.

124. Ibid., “Compte de tutelle Juishomme,” nos. 30,544 and 30,545.

125. Ibid., file no. illegible.

corroborate this story to a greater or lesser extent: one neighbour claimed that he had heard Lemaire hit her children, but had never seen her do so; the other that he had seen Lemaire beat one of her children in public, but only once. Both agreed that Lemaire was often drunk. When Lemaire herself, a housekeeper, was interviewed by the police, she stated that it was true that she sometimes hit her children, “but only to discipline them, and only when they have done something wrong.” She admitted that she had once forced one of her sons to sleep outside, but only because he had come home at an ungodly hour. Denying that she drank to excess, Lemaire reminded her interviewers that she had been the recipient of the Medal for French Mothers and that she had never been condemned of any criminal offense. When little Robert was interviewed without his mother present, he stated that she had never mistreated him.

During the course of the investigation, the police found another witness, a nearby shopkeeper, who also claimed that Lemaire was usually drunk and often beat her children. However, the police placed no faith whatsoever in this man’s testimony, having found him in a state of “complete shock and speechlessness,” while his accusations were littered with nonsensical details, such as Lemaire’s one year-old son coming over to the shop to ask him for help. The shopkeeper’s bizarre narrative may have helped to discredit other accounts unfavourable to Lemaire.

Ultimately, the police did not think that it was necessary to take any further action, and the bureaucrats at the Versailles departmental office also decided to do nothing. However, this was not the end of Lemaire’s problems; a few months later the owner of a café sent a letter of complaint to the state prosecutor, claiming to have extended a line of credit to Lemaire and made her leave her pension titles with him as a guarantee. About a month later, Lemaire had asked to borrow the titles for a day, explaining that she needed them for administrative purposes. The café owner stated that Lemaire had not returned the papers and insulted him in a most vulgar fashion when he brought it up. According to him, Lemaire was now living with a man who was “certainly eating up a large portion of the children’s income which is provided by the Wards of the Nation.” The letter concluded by accusing Lemaire of always being drunk.

Although the café owner’s business dealings were of no concern to the ONPN, the possibility that Lemaire was wasting the subventions that she received was more worrying. The police were once again sent out to investigate, and the café owner provided them with more details, claiming that widow Lemaire owed him four hundred francs, “while she wastes the money that she receives for her children, who live in the streets, unkept and wild.” Lemaire was therefore interviewed by the police for the second time in less than a year, and piously explained

that she had now been a war widow for three years, and had four young children: “I earn a temporary pension of 470 francs a month, and with that, I have to raise four children as best I can, since I don’t work. It’s true that I live with a man...who earns twenty-five francs a day, but that money, he needs it to feed himself.” She once again denied hitting her children or drinking, but she admitted her debt to the café owner, adding that she would pay him when she could, since she had other bills to worry about just then.

A few weeks after having received the report, the president of the departmental office of the Wards of the Nation wrote the state prosecutor, admitting that the information gathered over the course of the year was contradictory and that it would be difficult to justify stripping Lemaire of her paternal authority. He claimed to know for a fact (having perhaps looked into the matter himself) that the family did indeed live in great poverty. Although he did not have much faith in Lemaire’s ability to provide her children with the care that they required, he believed that she had never actually mistreated them.

Lemaire disappeared from sight for a few years, until the cantonal office in Versailles (where she had moved) wrote to the departmental office to complain that her four children were “left in a state of virtual abandonment by this mother who spends her days drinking.” This time there would be no reprieve, and after a few months a local tribunal stripped Lemaire of her paternal authority, at which point the ONPN assumed tutelage of her children. Lemaire died a few months later.

This case reveals how reality did not always match the lofty ideals and rhetoric concerning war widows, and the degree to which the National Office hesitated to take away a mother’s children if administrators were not absolutely certain that the children were in physical or moral danger. In spite of conflicting testimonies, it was painfully clear that Lemaire certainly did not fit the idealized notion of a poor widow devoted to her children whose conduct was above reproach for their sake and in order to honour the memory of her beloved husband. However, since there was no incontrovertible evidence that she abused her children, the Office went on providing her with subventions, although administrators were under no illusions regarding the extent to which the money did indeed serve to help the children. Administrators doubtless realized that in such cases the alternatives were limited and unsatisfactory for all parties concerned.

The decision to strip a widow of paternal authority and have her children taken away was not an irreversible one, and a mother who managed to prove herself worthy could hope to be reunited with her children. In 1934, the Versailles office ordered widow Rouys’ children to be

taken away from her because she let them run wild, with one of them taking full advantage of this and turning to a life of crime. The office conducted a new investigation in July 1939 after discovering that this widow had the intention of requesting that custody of her children be restored to her. Mrs. Rouys was found to be living with a 38-year-old “Italian gentleman.” According to their former neighbours, Rouys’ conduct had been quite acceptable, and her friend was a morally upstanding individual who “would not have allowed his lover to behave in an extravagant or unacceptable fashion.” Other neighbours agreed that if Mrs. Rouys had behaved in a “somewhat irresponsible” manner in the past, this was certainly no longer the case since she had “found her master.” The investigator was careful to determine that this individual was employed, working as a horse-trainer and receiving fifty francs a day plus room and board: the employer also had nothing but good to say about the couple. Rouys regained her paternal authority in 1939, on the grounds that over the past five years her conduct had been “excellent.”¹²⁶

Accounts from other departmental offices suggest that they faced the same problems as the Versailles office. The Doubs office explained that the office had been obliged to intervene several times to uphold the 1889 law on morally abandoned children. However, office leaders were disappointed by the results since the ultimate step of stripping widows of their paternal authority “faces so many obstacles that, for want of irrefutable proof (mainly thanks to a lack of people willing to testify), the investigations that we have launched have often been dead ends.” Furthermore, departmental administrators were concerned to note that local correspondents, so eager to ask for subventions on the part of families, did not show the same zeal when it came to reporting the moral danger faced by certain children in their homes.¹²⁷

Much as in Versailles, departmental administrators throughout the country were often willing to look the other way if a widow’s infraction was minor. In November 1922, the Seine departmental office dealt with the case of a Ward whose mother had requested an exceptional subvention, but had been turned down by the cantonal office because she had a “male friend” and was taking piano lessons. The council decided to overrule this decision and let her have the exceptional subvention. Although they frowned upon the widow’s behaviour, members pointed out that the most important thing was the well-being of the child, and it was clear that the family’s resources were limited.¹²⁸ The local offices were even quite forgiving when dealing

126. Ibid., “Compte de tutelle, famille Rouys.”

127. Département du Doubs, ONPN, *Rapport annuel (1921)*, 3.

128. ONPN du département de la Seine, Conseil d’Administration, *Procès verbaux*, 22e séance, November 1923, 4.

with widows who had been less than honest when asking for assistance. In 1920, the Paris office ran into a problem with a widow who had stated on her application form that she had been fired from her job and reduced to doing piece-work at home, a small apartment that she shared with her parents, and for which she paid 600 francs a month. After conducting an investigation, the cantonal office discovered that this was manifestly untrue, and that the widow had been able to purchase a small shop, for which she was paying 1,200 francs' rent. However, she was allowed to continue receiving the monthly subvention of twenty francs,¹²⁹ which indicates that she was still having a very difficult time making ends meet and that the cantonal office did not hold her lies against her.

Ironically, all this indicates that local administrators of the Wards of the Nation frequently chose not to act even in the one sphere where they had some leeway. Aware of the realities of life among the working class and peasant women who accounted for most of their charges, they realized that it was generally better to overlook behaviour that offended bourgeois propriety than to confine young children to state institutions or foster families. The ONPN, like charities and associations devoted to helping war widows (see following chapters), may have had to promote the ideal of the selfless war widow who lived only for her children, but those who worked with these women knew that it was not always simple to tell a bad mother from a good one.

War widows received unprecedented aid from the French state. The calamity of the Great War, which left over half a million young women widowed, motivated French legislators to take drastic steps to come to their aid. While the resulting state-provided pensions did not usually allow a widow to support herself and her children, the French government appeared almost generous in comparison to Britain or Germany. Although the rationale for these pensions was never made completely clear, it seems obvious that they were intended as a reward of sorts for the bravery of dead soldiers: the war widow as such did not deserve help, and it was only because of the exceptional conditions surrounding her husband's death that she was deemed more worthy of aid than other widows. Another obvious motivation for the assistance provided to war widows was their children, considered by many politicians to be more important than their mothers. War widows therefore found themselves in an odd position, recipients of unusual generosity on the state's part, but thanks only to the actions of others or the value of their children to the French "race."

129. *Ibid.*, July 1920, 3.

Natalism and the cult of the war dead in interwar France permeated the discourse of legislators and public figures, and created unrealistic expectations concerning the behaviour of war widows. However, the historian must be wary of mistaking words for actions, and it seems that in practice flexibility and realism were the rule rather than the exception. Likewise, we should not overestimate the power and reach of state apparatuses. The National Office of the Wards of the Nation was on a certain level typical of massive government bureaucracies, particularly when it came to the issue of nation-wide norms and standards regarding the subventions provided to widows. Despite an obvious concern for these women and a desire to make certain that they received money when they truly needed it, the obsession with standardization blinded administrators to certain instances of real need and led to an unfair repartition of the Office's resources. This should not detract from the fact that the ONPN was not in general an interventionist, all-powerful agent of the state, its authority being strictly limited and its representatives ultimately having to bow to the will of a mother. Office leaders may have often felt that they knew better than these women, but when all was said and done they had little say in the matter. The one great power that the Office wielded, the ability to recommend that a widow be stripped of her powers of paternal authority, was very rarely invoked; not only was it difficult to determine the truth regarding a mother's fitness, but the ONPN clearly considered it best to leave children with their mother whenever possible. In practice, the Office was far less interventionist than it could have been and often gave war widows the benefit of the doubt.

With all this talk of rhetoric, law and the state, it is easy to lose sight of war widows themselves and to forget that they were free agents, often acting in ways that the less-than-omniscient state had not foreseen. Most war widows were apparently less concerned with the "honour" involved in having their children named Wards of the Nation than in the financial assistance that this could provide. Such women were doing much the same as their "civilian" counterparts did, collecting small amounts of revenue here and there to make ends meet. The difference was that they had more choices open to them than widows who had lost their husbands in peacetime.

3: CHARITIES FOR WAR WIDOWS

Although government pensions and the assistance provided by the Wards of the Nation made war widows seem almost fortunate in comparison to their “civilian” counterparts, these women could not get by without additional resources, particularly if they had children to support. While some were able to survive by combining paid labour with subventions of various sorts, many others had no choice but to turn to charity.¹ Those who did so found many organizations devoted to helping women such as themselves in interwar France.² These charities, whether religious or secular, demonstrated that the new forms of government assistance for war widows were insufficient and that private charity still had a role to play in helping the poorest members of society during the interwar period. However, the philanthropic organizations in question also serve to highlight the fact that the line between public and private assistance was still a hazy one, and that the French state did not hesitate to use intermediaries to provide financial assistance to individuals. Charities, regardless of the extent to which they were supported by public funds, resembled government agencies such as the ONPN in other ways: they often displayed a patronizing attitude towards the women they helped, showed special consideration to middle-class widows, and often appeared to be motivated by natalism more than anything else. Ultimately, the philanthropic organizations we will be looking at prove that the 1920s and 1930s were very much a confused transitional period when it came to the development of welfare in France. Not only did older, traditional forms of assistance remain important in spite of the advent of more “modern” ones, but it could be difficult to differentiate between the two.

Charities had been an important part of poor relief in France prior to the Great War, particularly as far as widows and orphans, the archetypal “innocent victims,” were concerned. Charities devoted to helping the widows and orphans of policemen and firefighters were particularly popular, and were able to attract generous donations from wealthy philanthropists. The combination of a needy widow and the heroic death of a dearly loved husband was a potent

1. It would be interesting to compare the importance of such charities for war widows in other countries. Deborah Cohen has argued that in Great Britain philanthropic organizations played a very important role in assisting disabled war veterans, partly due to the fact that pension benefits were much less generous than on the Continent. Unfortunately, her study does not mention war widows. Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

2. A directory of charities published in 1931 shows that there were over fifty organizations dedicated to helping war widows in Paris, while several more assisted war victims more generally or war “orphans.” *Paris charitable bienfaisant et social. Nouvelle édition.* (Paris: Office Central des Oeuvres de bienfaisance, 1931).

one when it came to collecting funds, and in this sense, the situation of such women closely resembled that of war widows. A wife whose husband had died from pneumonia or as a result of an industrial accident was not considered particularly interesting, but a woman whose husband's death had been in some way "heroic" was seen as somehow more deserving of compassion and assistance.³

A large number of specialized charities dedicated to easing the plight of war widows saw the light of day during the war years.⁴ Such organizations were most active during the war itself, before the creation of the Wards of the Nation in 1917 and the passage of the 1919 pension law. Several of the new charities scaled back their activity soon after the conflict was over and slowly faded away during the following decade, particularly once the Office National des Pupilles de la Nation was well-established and operating efficiently. By the early 1920s, the public was increasingly coming to associate the ONPN with assistance for war orphans, and private charities were encouraging needy families to make full use of the new governmental agency.⁵ While public and private aid worked in tandem after the war,⁶ many important charities disappeared during the mid-twenties in spite of the fact that widows' pensions were not being increased quickly enough to compensate for the rising cost of living.⁷ Nevertheless, several organizations continued to distribute important sums of money to war widows and their children well into the

3. The *Caisse des Victimes du Devoir* was but one of many organizations that devoted itself to helping the widows and children of men who had shown great courage in the line of duty, providing the most needy ones with renewable yearly allocations. In 1921, this charity was providing pensions to 267 widows for a total of 185,000 francs: this made for an average pension of only 693 francs. The sum in question was less than the much-maligned pension given to most war widows at the time, although it seems certain that it was meant to complement a state pension provided to widows of civil servants such as brigadiers and policemen (see Chapter 1). The *Caisse* possessed eight million francs' worth of real estate, which provided an annual interest of almost half a million francs. AP, DX¹⁶ 16, File 677, *Caisse des victimes du devoir. Assemblée générale du 28 avril 1922*.

4. This was part of a larger phenomenon that saw a large number of charitable organizations spring up during the war to offer assistance of various sorts to the soldiers on the front, to wounded veterans and to civilian war victims. Pierre Darmon, *Vivre à Paris pendant la Grande Guerre*, 71-75.

5. ONPN officials were actually somewhat concerned with this phenomenon and hoped that significant private aid would continue to be made available to war widows and orphans. Office des Pupilles de la Nation du département de la Seine, Section permanente. *Procès verbaux*, 38e séance (7 juillet 1921), 15.

6. In 1919, the ONPN felt the need to quash rumours suggesting that adoption as a Ward automatically led to cessation of financial aid from benevolent organizations, suggesting that many Wards and their mothers also received private assistance of various sorts. ONPN, Conseil supérieur, *Procès verbaux*, 1919, 3e session, 11.

7. Two of the charities that we will be looking at experienced difficulties during 1921 and 1922, as fund-raising brought in less than expected and expenditures were cut even as more widows than ever sought assistance from them. It is difficult to tell whether this pattern held true for other philanthropic organizations, and the timing is not easily explained since it did not correspond with the financial crisis and inflation of 1923 and 1924 resulting from the French occupation of the Ruhr.

1930s despite the prominence of government aid.

There was a bewildering array of such charities, and we will only be looking at a few characteristic examples. The *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* and its successors were quite typical of such organizations, aiding widows not only by giving them money, but also by providing them with a wide range of services ranging from free medical care to job placement programs, whether they lived in urban centres or in the countryside. These organizations also kept war widows abreast of legal and policy developments that affected them, and went so far as to criticize governmental and public insensitivity towards their charges in a fashion reminiscent of war widows' associations (see below). Most philanthropic organizations devoted to war widows were secular, but a certain number had an overtly religious character, highlighting the important role that faith-based charities still played in Third Republic France. We will look at a few typical examples of such religious organizations.

Most of the charities that we will be examining, whether religious or secular, showed marked similarities to the ONPN when it came to their attitudes towards war widows and their children. Charities did not treat all such women equally, dividing their charges into two distinct categories. The individuals in charge of charitable organizations, who were frequently wealthy philanthropists, believed that while poor war widows needed only enough assistance to allow them to survive, middle-class widows had to be able to maintain the way of life to which they were accustomed. Most charities accepted that bourgeois widows, because their sensibilities were more refined than those of their coarser counterparts, should be treated with great consideration to ensure that they would not feel humiliated by the help they were receiving.

Furthermore, this middle-class mentality among philanthropists all too frequently led to a condescending attitude towards those they helped, which was again reminiscent of the ONPN. Many of the individuals behind these charities were genuinely concerned with their charges, but also patronizingly assumed that the average working-class or peasant war widow was a near-imbecile who needed to be supervised and guided as much as possible now that her better half was gone. This is exactly what the president of the *Association d'assistance aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* believed:

The widow, crippled by suffering and the weight of her new responsibilities, finds herself at the mercy of every impulse, of every suggestion... Slowly but surely, you were able to give this desperate woman some peace of mind... slowly you became her confidante and her guide. You took the place that had been left empty by the death of the husband and the father.⁸

8. AP, DX⁶ 14, File 491 *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la grande guerre. Bulletin annuel (1926)*, 5-6.

We will see that it was important for all charitable organizations (but particularly the religious ones) to ensure widows' morality through regular "visits" that were really inspections of sorts, while leaders did not hesitate to use and abuse the stereotypical image of war widows as weak and helpless but innately virtuous. The leaders of charities also tended to parrot natalist thought and rhetoric and usually made it clear that for them a widow and a woman was first and foremost a mother. Because of such beliefs, philanthropic organizations were divided when it came to the issue of war widows working outside the home: certain realized that this was usually an absolute necessity for the women, a few even went so far as to consider it beneficial, but many believed that mothers should devote themselves to their children and stay at home.⁹

These echoes of government attitudes were all the more ironic due to another similarity between charitable organizations and the ONPN: the prominent role that women played in them. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century philanthropy in general was largely dependent on the contribution of women in voluntary organizations, which were often religious in nature.¹⁰ It was only after the associations law of 1901 that such charitable organizations slowly began to free themselves from Church tutelage, particularly during the interwar period.¹¹ Women were the first to identify the needs of mothers and children and attempt to help them through charitable organizations; while European states long relied on such private female initiatives, they often took over their funding and management as they became more interested in the direct provision

9. Such attitudes were common in the industrialized West generally during the past two centuries. For example, in the United States, mothers who received state assistance could be forced to abandon full-time employment in order to be able to remain at home with their children, regardless of the financial hardships which this may have caused. Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 469.

10. Unfortunately, no one has yet written extensively on this topic as far as the French Third Republic is concerned. It is clear that the philanthropic activity of women, generally under the auspices of the Church, was central to welfare provision during the July Monarchy and the Second Empire. Catholic women's lay associations (with the help of female religious orders) were the principal means of providing such private assistance; the best-known of these female-run charities focussed their efforts on providing aid to women and children, particularly pregnant women and new mothers. Contrary to what contemporaries may have believed about women's natural proclivity for religion, members of the charities were probably attracted by the companionship and sociability, as well as by the chance to be active in the wider community. Sarah A. Curtis, "Charitable Ladies: Gender, Class and Religion in Mid Nineteenth-Century Paris," *Past & Present*, no. 177 (2002), 121-122, 128-129; Hazel Mills, "Negotiating the Divide: Women, Philanthropy and the 'Public Sphere' in Nineteenth-Century France," in *Religion, Society and Politics in France Since 1789*, eds. Frank Tallett and Nicholas Atkin (London: The Hambledon Press, 1991), 49-52.

11. Evelyne Diebolt, "Women and Philanthropy in France: From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries," in *Women, Philanthropy and Civil Society*, ed. Kathleen D. McCarthy (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 29-30. Diebolt mentions that the need to provide health care and support for war widows and orphans during the 1920s and 1930s contributed to an "explosion" of charitable organizations. However, she does not provide any further details. *Ibid.*, 49.

of welfare.¹² Although this did not happen to charities for war widows in interwar France, there was a surprisingly high degree of indirect government involvement in these private organizations.

In fact, while all the organizations examined in this chapter were “charities,” the term can be somewhat misleading. The overlap and confusion between charities and social welfare in Third Republic France (see page 6) was often echoed when it came to organizations dealing with war widows and orphans in the aftermath of the Great War.¹³ Various government agencies and departments, including the Office National des Pupilles de la Nation, provided important subventions to certain private charities that aided war victims. One extreme such case was the *Oeuvre française de protection des orphelins de guerre*, a charity that was essentially bankrolled by the ONPN, which provided it with subventions worth 150,000 francs a year in 1922 and 1923.¹⁴ While such large subventions were rare, we will see that the government played a major role in supporting nominally private charities.

State assistance for war widows was therefore more important than one might have believed, since in addition to limited welfare measures such as pensions, the government also provided sizeable subventions to many organizations that helped these women. This also means that charitable aid was not quite so great as it appeared on the basis of the sheer amount of money distributed by French charities, much of which actually came from the government. As has already been seen, the line between self-help and charity was often equally blurry, with many mutual aid societies depending on the largesse of a few wealthy patrons. Certain charities dedicated to war widows even tried to disguise themselves as self-help organizations, as was the case with the *Assistance mutuelle des veuves de guerre*, which we will be examining in more detail. Even when such duplicity was not involved, however, it could be extremely difficult to determine where philanthropy ended and state welfare or self-help began.

The situation is particularly confusing as far as charities for war widows and orphans are concerned thanks to the interplay and exchange of funds between various groups in both the

12. There seems to have been less possibility for the emergence of such “private” female-defined social welfare programs in strong states such as France and Germany, at least in comparison to the Anglo-Saxon democracies. Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, “Womanly Duties,” 1079-1080.

13. As early as 1916, Deputy Pierre Masse, who was the true inspiration behind the government’s war pension project that would lead to the law of 1919, recommended that the newly-created pension service work in close collaboration with private relief organizations that helped war victims. *JO, Débats parlementaires*. Chambre des députés, session du 20 janvier 1916, 55.

14. AP, DX⁶ 23, file 19, *Oeuvre française de protection des orphelins de la Grande Guerre*. The *Oeuvre* took care of war orphans, normally by arranging to have them raised out in the countryside under the surveillance of carefully-chosen women, most of whom were themselves war widows.

public and private sector. There existed a few key organizations that did nothing but raise money for widows and orphans, which was then passed on to other organizations who handed the money out to the women in question. Foreign charities, particularly those in the United States, gave very significant amounts of money to French organizations that could often change hands several times before reaching the widows themselves. Finally, various French governmental entities, from the Ministry of War to the ONPN to municipal councils, provided sizeable subsidies to various French charities, both of the fund-raising and fund-distributing kind. Due to the nature of surviving records,¹⁵ it is often difficult to know exactly where the money that a charity was disbursing came from and up to what point it essentially functioned as an extension of state welfare.

The *Comité central de secours aux veuves et orphelins de guerre*, for example, was one of the major providers of cold hard cash for many charitable organizations that assisted widows and orphans during and after the war. The Committee raised funds through various means, the most important one being nation-wide fairs or carnivals. The first “Military Orphans’ Day,” which took place in 1915, was a huge success: 3.6 million francs were collected and passed on to various charitable organizations, who then handed out subventions of ten francs per month to the mothers of needy orphans. The second such event, held a year later, was less successful, accounting for a collection of only 2.6 million francs, although this was offset by a donation of half a million francs from the Ministry of War and an equal amount from an American charity, the *Société américaine de secours aux orphelins*. In all, the Committee managed to collect thirty-nine million francs and pass this money on to intermediary organizations between 1915 and 1924, although fully twenty-five million francs were really credits from the Ministries of War, Public Instruction and the Interior. The Committee’s scope of action was gradually reduced as the ONPN established itself and began operating efficiently, and the organization dissolved itself in 1924.¹⁶

Among the American charities that forwarded large amounts of money directly or indirectly to French widows and orphans was the *Fatherless Children of France*.¹⁷ Between

15. All the charitable organizations examined in this chapter have long ceased to exist. The only traces left are often short booklets summing up the annual general meeting and these do not provide detailed financial records.

16. AHAP, 8C 40.010 III. *Une page d'histoire de la Grande Guerre: L'Oeuvre accomplie par le Comité central de secours aux orphelins, veuves et ascendants des militaires morts pour la France du 21 juin 1915 au 30 juin 1924*, no pagination.

17. This organization was founded in late 1915 with the objective of providing orphaned children with financial assistance so that they could continue living at home. The founders tried to create a personal relationship between American donors and French orphans by having the two parties correspond on a

1916 and 1921, this organization distributed the impressive sum of 150 million francs to French orphans. However, only seventeen million francs were distributed during the next six years, since the charity had considerably reduced its activity in 1921 once the Office National des Pupilles de la Nation was functioning smoothly. In 1927, individual donations to the organization totalled 1.1 million francs, while a large bequest provided over two million francs: in all, 3.3 million francs were given out the same year. As an organization whose time was past, the charity was at that point no longer particularly concerned with balancing the books and thought it best to simply spend all its money.¹⁸ Such numbers suggest the important role that American aid played in succouring French war widows, and make it clear that French charities for such women were often neither completely French nor charitable.

Religious Charities

Religious charities played an important role in providing help for war widows, showing that such Christian institutions were still important after the separation of Church and State. These organizations provided services broadly similar to those of their secular counterparts, had the same patronizing attitude towards most of those whom they helped, and paid special attention to the needs of middle-class women. The life-cycle of such organizations mirrored that of lay organizations: they were much-needed during and shortly after the war, but their activity decreased markedly during the 1920s.

The *Oeuvre des bons-enfants* was founded in November 1914 to assist war orphans under sixteen years of age. Despite being the brain-child of the Cardinal of Paris, this charitable organization was not technically a religious one: it downplayed its origins and patronage, and the image it sought to project was that of a good Republican organization concerned only with the material needs of those it helped. This disinterest in religious matters was made much easier by the fact that the *Oeuvre* worked in tandem with another charity, the *Parish Committee for War Orphans* (see below), which was more spiritual in nature. The *Oeuvre*, which was presided by

regular basis. The Fatherless Children of France had initially been a branch of a larger charity, the American Society for the Relief of French War Orphans, which had merged with the Red Cross towards the end of the war. The society had 130 committees throughout the United States, and provided aid to approximately 50,000 French war orphans. Ida Clyde Clarke, *American Women and the World War* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1918), no pagination. See also Olivier Faron, *Les enfants du deuil*, 75-77.

18. AHAP, Envelope 8°C 40.0123 I-II. *Fraternité Franco-Américaine (Fatherless Children of France). Office de Répartition des dons américains aux orphelins de la guerre fondé en mars 1916. Compte rendu de la XIIIe Assemblée Générale tenue le 12 mars 1928*, 11-12, 14. According to Olivier Faron, the American branch of the charity was dissolved in 1922 (perhaps because the local ONPN offices were now running smoothly?), but he is wrong to state that the French branch dissolved itself in 1926. Olivier Faron, *Les enfants du deuil*, 163.

the Duchess of Uzès, a well-known royalist and patron of charitable organizations,¹⁹ was most active during the war and was forced to scale back its activities due to a lack of funds by the beginning of the 1920s. Its greatest expenditure traditionally involved orphans that had been placed in homes, and despite budgetary restrictions, it spent 427,000 francs on these children during the 1921-1922 fiscal year, while another 4,500 francs were used to send children off to vacation colonies.²⁰ The *Oeuvre*, which was responsible for 300 or so children in 1921, received important subventions from the Office National des Pupilles de la Nation, and was able to continue providing apprenticeship bursaries thanks to subventions from the *Comité central de secours aux veuves, ascendants et orphelins de la guerre*. Between 1915 and 1924, the Committee provided the *Oeuvre des bons-enfants* with over two million francs, most of which actually came from various government ministries. Nearly a hundred children were able to learn artisanal trades as they benefited from the bursaries. The charity not only provided the apprentices with money, but also made certain that they were supervised by volunteers from the St-Vincent de Paul society, who visited them in their workplaces and home.²¹

The *Oeuvre* was concerned mainly with the welfare of orphans, but also placed a good deal of emphasis on “guiding” war widows in their tasks as mothers and inculcating them with middle-class values. A special subsection of the organization existed for this purpose: the *dames visiteuses* were “ladies” who regularly visited war widows, “encouraging them, developing in them the love of their home and hearth as well as the desire to inculcate in their children the virtues of moral rectitude and honesty, explaining to them how they had to have their children

19. The good duchess was quite active in philanthropic circles during her lifetime, and also lent her name to certain causes that she considered worthy. Unusually for a woman of her social background, she was an active feminist, and supported the effort to win women the legal right to control their own wages. She was also briefly vice-president of the *Union française pour le suffrage des femmes*, which she helped found. James McMillan, *France and Women*, 212. Uzès was probably not actively involved in the day to day running of the *Bons Enfants*: this charity made little impression on her since she failed to mention it in her memoirs. Anne de Rochechouart-Mortenart, *Souvenirs de la Duchesse d'Uzès* (Paris: Plon, 1939).

20. The French *colonie de vacance*, intended to let working-class urban children spend a few weeks in the countryside, dates back to the 1880s. These soon became popular with private charities and Socialist and Communist municipal governments: by 1910, over 72,000 children across the country were being sent to such colonies every year. The number had sky-rocketed to 420,000 twenty-five years later thanks in part to encouragement from the Popular Front government, and the colonies became an almost universal rite of passage. Laura Lee Downs, *Childhood in the Promised Land: Working-Class Movements and the Colonies de Vacances in France, 1880-1960* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 21, 65. Downs warns against seeing the colonies merely as a means of social control, reminding her readers that they addressed very real health problems that were present in urban youth, from tuberculosis to rickets. *Ibid.*, 37.

21. AP, DX¹⁶ 16, File 661, *L'Oeuvre des Bons Enfants: Association pour la Protection des Veuves et des Orphelins de la Guerre de 1914. Bulletin, Exercice 1921-1922*, no pagination. That same year, the Paris municipal council had given the organization a “generous” subvention, as it always had in the past.

placed in apprenticeships once they came of age..."²² Such a statement suggests the class bias and patronizing attitude of charitable organisations, and it is certain that many war widows did not welcome such advice.

Realizing that some of these mothers also needed more practical assistance, the organization had a "Special Section for Widows" to help them, particularly those who found themselves in a precarious position thanks to a large number of children. The section distributed regular payments to help these families cope, as well as emergency one-time payments. Most of the women receiving this sort of assistance had been the wives of officers, and it seems to have been less a question of helping such widows with basic necessities than allowing them to maintain the lifestyle to which they were accustomed. The *Oeuvre* also provided regular financial aid to widows more generally (to the tune of twenty-three francs per trimester), and emergency grants (ranging from fifteen to fifty francs) to those who found themselves momentarily short of resources due to illness or unemployment.²³

The *Parish Committee for War Orphans* did little more than direct needful widows and orphans to the *Oeuvre des bons enfants*, with which it enjoyed a close relationship. In fact, the leaders gave the impression of having been more concerned with the spiritual salvation of widows than anything else, arguing that the *Bons Enfants* would provide for their material needs. This organization was overtly religious in nature, but as was the norm among charities, it claimed to be willing to extend help to those of any faith, since "all fought for us."²⁴

The *Parish Committee* did not hesitate to give patronizing advice of its own to the women in its care:

It is therefore necessary for this woman [the war widow] to draw up, with the assistance of the *dame visiteuse*, the budget of her resources; she must calculate what she receives from military allocations, from various *secours* for which she is eligible...and once this budget had been drawn up, she will have to determine how much is missing for her and her children to live without lacking in basic necessities. She will have to earn the difference, but it would be counterproductive for her to go to the factory, where she will work day and night for ten or twelve hours to earn a measly eight francs; it is a hundred

22. Ibid. The "dames visiteuses" were not a new phenomenon, and such women could be found working for many private charities, mutual aid societies and government agencies, including the Assistance Publique. They were charged not only with helping and advising the recipients of assistance, but with ensuring that they lived up to certain moral standards, something which often required intrusive oversight on their part. Rachel Fuchs, *Poor and Pregnant in Paris*, 168-169; Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 468.

23. AP, DX¹⁶ 16, File 661, *L'Oeuvre des Bons Enfants: Association pour la Protection des Veuves et des Orphelins de la Guerre de 1914. Bulletin, Exercice 1921-1922*

24. AHAP, Enveloppe 8C 40,024 I-IV, *Les Comités Paroissiaux d'orphelins de la guerre: Assemblée plénière du 4 juin 1917*, 12, 31.

times better to let the *dame visiteuse* guide her to an organization like the *Bons Enfants* that will provide her with a sewing machine so that she can work from home.²⁵

The class bias of the instructions is worth noting, as is the implication that without the assistance and guidance of the middle-class *dame visiteuse*, the widow would have been incapable of rational thought or action, while the very concept of something so intellectually demanding as a budget would have been completely alien to her. As for the emphasis on home work, this was common among such charitable organizations, a mantra of philanthropists that was quite disconnected from reality: as we have seen in Chapter 1, the pay for such work was derisory, and in any case, there would have been precious little of it available.

The *Association nationale pour la protection des veuves et des orphelins de la guerre de 1914* was another religious charity that provided an important amount of help to war widows in Paris while the conflict was still raging. Its beginnings were modest, as it was only able to assist 330 orphans in August 1915; however, by the beginning of the new year, that number had nearly quadrupled. Each month, *dames visiteuses* paid a visit to the war widows on their list to give them ten francs for each child they had, and at the same time tried to make certain that these children were receiving some sort of education. The *Association* also helped widows find work, gave them legal advice and helped them file pension requests.²⁶

This charity relied heavily on the work of lay religious orders, in particular the *Dames du Calvaire*, a hundred of whom were responsible for visiting the war widows and their orphans at home, while others provided generous donations. This lay order had already been involved in similar charity work with widows prior to the war,²⁷ and in 1915 the *Association nationale* asked for their assistance. The lay sisters provided the war widows with more than small monthly cash allowances, giving them help in kind or in the form of vouchers that could be redeemed for food and clothing. If the sisters knew that a certain family was particularly hard-pressed for time or in which the mother could not travel easily, they would bring them groceries.²⁸

Although this particular association did not long outlive the war, its leaders believed that

25. Ibid., 28.

26. AHAP, 8C 40.010bis, *Bulletin de l'Association nationale pour la protection des veuves et des orphelins de la guerre de 1914*, mars 1916, 10-12.

27. The *Dames du Calvaire* had been founded in Lyon in 1842 and established themselves in Paris during the 1870s. The organization's goal was to gather well-off widows in order to "sanctify them and console them through charity." The *Dames* supported various charitable projects prior to the war, particularly hospices for incurably ill women. *Manuel des oeuvres, institutions religieuses et charitables de Paris* (Paris: Librairie Ch. Poussielgue, 1900), 386.

28. AHAP, 8C 40.010bis, *Bulletin de l'Association nationale pour la protection des veuves et des orphelins de la guerre de 1914*, Mars 1916, 43.

charitable efforts such as theirs were the wave of the future: “In the time of trouble in which we find ourselves, the state will more than ever have to rely on private charity—whether or not it wants to. The expenditures that the state will face in the coming months and years will be beyond measure. How will such obligations be met?”²⁹ This prophecy did not come true: greater state intervention meant that charitable organizations did not always enjoy halcyon years during the interwar period, and by the 1930s many of the charities created to aid war widows were winding down and disappearing, regardless of how large they were.

The Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre

One of the largest and most important charities devoted to war widows was the *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre*, founded in 1915 by Baroness Lejeune (née Murat) whose husband had been killed during the first days of the war. This large organization lent material and moral assistance to the widows of officers, sub-officers and soldiers, but paid particular attention to women who had children to support. Thanks to the “absolute devotion” of the good Baroness, the Association’s development was extremely swift, and the government allowed it to add the designation “directed to the public benefit” to its name in February 1916.³⁰ The Association’s roots were in Paris, but it quickly spread to the countryside and by 1920 was composed of seventeen regional committees and a further sixty-six sub-committees, ensuring its presence in forty-one departments. During the twenty years of its existence, the Association signed up over forty thousand war widows and sixty thousand war orphans (eleven thousand widows and fifteen thousand of these orphans were in and around Paris), to whom it distributed a total of over sixteen million francs which it had collected, and also passed along a further twenty-one million francs that came from other organizations.³¹

As these numbers suggest, the Associations’s financial health was generally robust. The following figures show annual donations compared to assistance given out during the organization’s first five years of existence:

1915:	310,000 / 80,000
1916:	780,000 / 313,000
1917:	1,100,000 / 580,000
1918:	1,680,000 / 1,330,000

29. Ibid., 18.

30. Associations in France can still ask that the government recognize them as being directed to the public benefit (*reconnue d'utilité publique*), a status that confers significant financial advantages, albeit at the price of a certain degree of oversight, particularly in terms of annual budgets.

31. AHAP 1K-29, *Notice historique sur l'Association d'aide aux veuves de militaire de la Grande Guerre, 1915-1935*, 5, 11.

1919: 2,200,000 / 1,500,000

Like many large-scale charitable organizations that assisted war widows, the Association used a large portion of the donations that it received during its early years to accumulate a capital whose interest would provide a steady source of revenue in the future, something that might prove necessary should donations diminish significantly. By the end of 1919, the Association therefore had a handy little portfolio worth over a million francs, but had also given out about four million francs to needy widows and orphans, which certainly represented an important sum of money.³²

It is hardly surprising that a charity that was run by such influential individuals (the Honorary President was none other than Marshall Foch, while his wife was vice-president and the Council was composed almost exclusively of wives of colonels and generals) had plentiful resources and did not have to go begging for donations. In 1925 for example, the Association distributed over 1.5 million francs' worth of direct and indirect aid, with such generosity being made possible thanks to sizeable contributions, such as that of one Widow Crespin, who left the association 100,000 francs in her will. The Association also benefited from large donations provided by corporations such as Citroen, to say nothing of military "celebrities" such as Marshall Pétain, who had given 28,000 francs in 1924. The Association was also passing along important sums of money that came from private American charities, such as 337,000 francs from the *marrainages américains* and 180,000 francs from the *Fraternité Franco-américaine* (see above) in 1924.³³

In addition, the Association received subventions from the ONPN (50,000 francs in 1924), and also forwarded money that came from various governmental agencies. The *Comité central de secours aux orphelins, veuves et ascendants des militaires morts pour la France* provided many of the widows, orphans and parents represented by the Association (and similar organizations) with subventions of forty francs per trimester. By the end of 1922 this responsibility had devolved to the Office National des Mutilés,³⁴ but in both cases the money was given to the Association to forward it to widows.³⁵

32. *Bulletin trimestriel de l'Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* no. 4 (July 1920), 15.

33. AP, DX⁶ 14, File 491 *Association d'Aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre*. *Bulletin annuel* (1926), 9-10, 12-13; *Bulletin trimestriel de l'association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* no. 10 (Jan. 1922), 11.

34. *Bulletin trimestriel de l'Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* no. 13 (October 1922), 9.

35. This system came to an end in 1923, with the Office foregoing the third-party approach. *Ibid.*, no. 16 (July 1923), 31.

The *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires* also benefited from occasional spontaneous fund-raising events. During the Easter holiday of 1921, a certain Mr. Franck, president of the Union of French Theatre Directors, decided to organize more or less spontaneous collections in forty-three Parisian theatres and several more in the provinces, with all the profits going to the association. The collections were announced to the public in each theatre by an actor who recited a trite little monologue; the spectators were sufficiently moved to donate over seventy thousand francs.³⁶

Although the Association assisted an important number of war victims, it was able to cope thanks to impressive financial resources, except for one brief episode in 1921. The number of widows asking to join the Association in Paris was steadily increasing, while it was becoming more and more difficult to recruit enough *dames visiteuses* to conduct the necessary investigations and to keep a close (but of course benign) eye on those widows who were admitted. The administrative council was worried that the organization's resources would prove insufficient for the number of new admissions that seemed imminent. By the middle of the year, the Association's membership had risen to thirty-seven thousand widows and almost sixty thousand orphans, an increase that was due in part to a recent fusion with the *Ruban rouge*, a charity that had assisted the widows and orphans of members of the Legion of Honour who fell during the war. The council therefore reluctantly decided to limit many of its services to widows who were responsible for at least three children or who were seriously ill. However, certain of the Association's activities, such as job placement and the provision of homework, continued to be available to all "morally reputable" widows.³⁷ This period was the only truly troubled one in the Association's twenty year existence, and it experienced no further unanticipated difficulties.

The Association's aid could take a number of forms, including useful advice on personal matters and questions of pensions, as well as help in finding employment or learning a trade. In addition, the organization provided medical care and prescription drugs, assistance for raising children and for their education, and saw to it that those same children could spend the summer by the sea or in the mountains. Finally, the Association dispensed various sorts of aid to war widows and their children, whether in the form of money³⁸ or food and clothing.

36. *Bulletin trimestriel de l'Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre*, no. 7 (May 1921), 3, 5.

37. *Ibid.*, no. 6 (February 1921), 7; no. 8 (August 1921), 16-17.

38. Subventions in Paris and the provinces were handed out every trimester: the exact amount varied considerably from year to year as inflation wreaked havoc with the franc's worth, but at the end of 1919 each widow received forty francs, with another thirty francs per child. This assistance was automatically renewed until such time as a widow's circumstances had altered. The subventions accounted for 1.5 million

This charitable organization was composed of several typical sub-sections, the most important of which was the *dames visiteuses* who ensured that candidates were truly needy and lived a moral life. The decision to help any given widow was not taken lightly: the *dames* conducted a “minute and complete” examination of the applicant’s mores, resources and dependent family members in order to determine their true needs and the assistance that they could receive from other charities or government agencies. Meticulous records were kept for every widow that was admitted, and these were updated on the basis of reports submitted by those *dames visiteuses* who were responsible for keeping in regular contact with the women. In contrast, the *dames visiteuses* in the Section for Officers’ Widows (see below) operated with the “greatest discretion possible,” since such women’s feelings and sensibilities had to be spared.³⁹

Other sub-sections included the Embroidery and Lingerie Section and the Dolls Section, both of which gave out home work to particularly skilled and gifted widows, offering better wages than the large department stores. This scheme had the advantage of allowing these widows to stay at home so that they could be with their children and “avoid the promiscuity and regimentation of the workshops,” while earning enough money to improve their situation.⁴⁰ The Embroidery Section reported that sales figures had risen from 16,000 francs in 1918 to 22,000 in 1919, all the money being provided as salary to the sixty-one widows who worked there. The workshop for the manufacture of dolls’ clothes had not been so fortunate, and financial difficulties had forced it to suspend operations for six months out of the year.⁴¹ By the mid-twenties both sections were having a difficult time providing widows with enough money due to the rising cost of living, but business picked up by 1926, when the Embroidery and Lingerie Section provided work for fifty-four widows who manufactured 102,000 francs’ worth of goods and shared 73,500 francs in wages. Three of the widows had earned over 5,000 francs, and most of them earned between 2,000 and 3,000 francs, which represented decent earnings that must have nicely complemented their pensions. The Doll Section was not as important, and only

francs between 1914 and 1924 in Paris alone. Widows became ineligible for assistance after they remarried. AHAP, 1K2-9, *Notice historique sur l’Association d’aide aux veuves de militaire de la Grande Guerre, 1915-1935*, 14, 35.

39. *Ibid.*, 5, 11; *Bulletin Trimestriel de l’Association d’aide aux Veuves de Militaires de la Grande Guerre* no. 1., 1919/1920, no pagination.

40. These supposed advantages of homework were regularly trotted out by its proponents, whose categorization of labour was based largely on gender. For an example from the previous century that also concerned embroidery, see Whitney Walton, “Working Women, Gender, and Industrialization in Nineteenth-Century France: The Case of Lorraine Embroidery Manufacturing,” in *European Women and Preindustrial Craft*, ed. Daryl M. Hafer (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 100-101.

41. *Bulletin trimestriel de l’Association d’aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre*, no. 4 (July 1920), 10-11.

accounted for 31,000 francs in sales for 1926, which meant that the ten workers employed split 22,500 francs in wages.⁴² Every year during the month of December, the Association organized an exposition and sale at its Parisian headquarters that was intended to provide a showcase for a few war widows. Broderie, fine lingerie, wool and silk sweaters, cushions, handbags, children's clothing, dolls and knick-knacks were all on display and available for purchase. The 1920 exposition was fairly typical, with the Association selling just over 12,000 francs' worth of goods, the money being shared by the twenty-nine widows whose work was on display.⁴³

The Association also included the typical clothing section (*vestiaire*), which had been particularly active during and immediately after the war, providing various items to an average of 2,000 families a year. In addition to supplying essential items such as shoes, shirts and dresses, it also distributed complete sets of clothing to orphans going off to summer camp, and provided many of those same children with their special outfits for first communion. This section also distributed a certain amount of food that was donated to the Association by several large Parisian grocery stores.⁴⁴ In 1920, the clothing section reported that in Paris alone 4,000 packages of clothing and shoes had been distributed to widows and their children, the packages having been spread out among nearly 2,000 families.⁴⁵

The Work and Placement Section was particularly important since the organization placed much emphasis on training women "whose material well-being had until then been completely assured by the husband, and who were in no way prepared to earn a living and support their children." A large number of such individuals were placed in the specialized *École Rachel*, the only facility in the country designed solely for the reeducation of war widows, where they were taught a variety of simple trades, such as the winding of electric wire and the decoration of prosthetic limbs; others, more gifted, were taught short-hand dictation and typing, artificial flower-making, book-binding, or photographic work. In addition, a few war widows were placed in specialized nursing or beauty schools. The Association received a great deal of help in this respect from the Office National des Mutilés et Réformés, with many war widows simply being directed to the institutions created and operated by the Office for the benefit of war

42. AP, DX⁶ 14, File 491 *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre. Bulletin Annuel (1926)*, 14-15; AHAP 1K2-9, *Notice historique sur l'Association d'aide aux Veuves de Militaire de la Grande Guerre, 1915-1935*, 19.

43. *Bulletin trimestriel de l'association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* no. 6 (Feb. 1921), 3.

44. AHAP 1K2-9, *Notice historique sur l'Association d'aide aux Veuves de Militaire de la Grande Guerre, 1915-1935*, 17, 19.

45. *Bulletin trimestriel de l'Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la grande guerre* no. 4 (July 1920), 11-12.

veterans.⁴⁶ In 1919, the Work and Placement section found jobs for ninety-four widows in typically “feminine” occupations: thirty-one in offices; twenty-five in couture houses; fifteen in miscellaneous jobs; seven as domestic servants; six as nurses; four in commercial establishments; two as governesses; two as typists; and one as a dental technician.⁴⁷

This Section also supported a few widows (thirty-nine in 1919) while they pursued apprenticeships in various trades, but one particularly useful service that it offered involved providing widows advances on the sums that they were due from the state to facilitate their reeducation (see page 72), but which often did not reach them in a timely fashion. The Association had an informal understanding on this point with the Office National des Mutilés et Réformés, which was responsible for these subventions: in 1919, the thirty widows who were pursuing their apprenticeships at the École Rachel received the equivalent of their subventions from the Association, which was later reimbursed by the Office. It is probable that all parties involved agreed on this policy because it was convenient for everyone, including the widows, who were more accustomed to dealing with the charitable Association than with the Office.⁴⁸ This arrangement is a fine example of the ways in which governmental agencies and private charities cooperated during the interwar period in order to come to the aid of war widows.

Another of the Association’s sections was dedicated to children, particularly those of non-commissioned officers and soldiers, and helped widows raise their sons and daughters in various ways. To this end, the association gave cash incentives to mothers who nursed their own children, as well as subventions to those who had to place them in orphanages, pensions, schools or with “honourable” families: the Association aided almost six hundred such children in 1919. In addition, the Children’s Section gave scholarships and bursaries to orphans who wanted to become apprentices, and provided open-air holidays for orphans living in cities and towns who could not easily get away for the summer. In 1920, the Children’s Section provided assistance for roughly five hundred children living in *pensions*, while fifty children under the age of three

46. AHAP 1K2-9, *Notice historique sur l’Association d’aide aux veuves de militaires de la grande guerre, 1915-1935*, 15.

47. *Bulletin trimestriel de l’Association d’aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* no. 4 (July 1920), 10-11. The section had dealt with fewer demands than during the previous year, which suggested to the administrators that widows were happy where they were placed. This was typical of the positive spin that charitable organizations often tried to put on things. In fact, it is doubtful that most of the widows would have described themselves as “happy” with their new jobs; their reluctance to leave them was most likely motivated by harsh economic necessity rather than by personal inclination.

48. *Ibid.*, no. 1 (1919/1920), no pagination.

being raised by their mothers received financial aid.⁴⁹

The Association's medical section had two doctors on hand to provide free consultations, and also reimbursed pharmaceutical expenses and provided widows and orphans with orthopaedic devices. This section was also responsible for placing delicate, sick or tuberculosis-ridden women and children in clinics where they could hopefully regain their strength.⁵⁰ In 1920, the Medical Section placed about eighty widows in clinics across France, while a hundred more benefited from free medical consultations or drugs or both. Widows who were hospitalized were asked to help defray expenses by handing over a certain percentage of their pension, but the Association insisted that the cost to them remained very low. The medical section also gave these women assistance of some sort when they left the hospital, usually in the form of monthly subventions that allowed them to recuperate at home for a while.⁵¹

In addition to these sections, the Association also included a special one devoted to the widows of officers, although it also welcomed the widows of soldiers who were of a sufficient social rank not to feel out of place. This section was responsible for over 2,500 widows and six thousand orphans by the mid-twenties, of whom 278 received aid worth a total of eighty thousand francs. Despite the relatively comfortable origin of these widows, their plight was often a grim one, and many of them lived in near poverty despite their "courage and the efforts made by many of them to earn a living for themselves and their children." To alleviate this suffering, the section gave out not only money, but also clothing and scholarships for their children. The Association was also able to provide fourteen widows with sewing machines that allowed them to work at home, and occasionally purchased barnyard animals for rural widows in order to make their small farms more viable.⁵²

Helping the widows of officers was particularly challenging for the Association, since

49. Ibid. The Association never lost sight of war orphans' needs, even when it came to the small things, and tried to put a little cheer into the holiday season for the women and children in its care. For example, the Parisian headquarters always organized an annual Christmas celebration complete with a giant tree for the orphans of the city and its suburbs. In 1921, over 1,500 widows accompanied their children to this celebration, where many free toys were distributed. Ibid., no. 6 (February 1921), 5.

50. Ibid., no 1 (1919/1920), no pagination.

51. Ibid., no. 4 (July 1920) 11-12.; no. 8 (August 1921), 18. The medical section was concerned only with the widows and orphans of simple soldiers, the other women and children being sent to another specialized organization, the *Fondation de la Victoire* (see below).

52. *Bulletin trimestriel de l'Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* no. 8 (August 1921), 13. According to the Secretary responsible for this Section, the widows of officers suffered greatly because of very high rents, and he lamented "the particularly painful situation of this category of victims of the war," which was due in part to the "derisory" pensions that they received—such as one particular widow of a general whose annual pension was "only" three thousand francs. This statement should make the reader skeptical about certain of the melodramatic statements that follow.

these women had to be found before anything could be done for them. Many of them were extremely reluctant to come forward and ask for help, hoping to keep their poverty hidden: "And what poverty it was! They had nothing to live on other than the derisory pension accorded by the State...living in a miserable, frozen little apartment where they were not able to eat every day..."⁵³ Many of the women in this Section had few if any marketable skills, little or no fortune, and were ill-equipped for the trials that lay ahead.⁵⁴ A few such widows had the courage to learn a trade that enabled them to supplement their meagre pension to the point where they could eke out a tolerable existence for themselves and their children. But others, less energetic or in poor health, as well as those who were unable to leave their homes because of very young children, suffered "terrible privations," and the *dames visiteuses* were horrified to witness the ravages of tuberculosis among them. Everything possible was done to spare the feelings of these widows: only a select few people in the organization knew their names and their needs, while their files were kept under lock and key. Again, the class bias of such organizations comes to light: a select few middle-class women were allowed the privilege of anonymity and careful handling, but the working-class widow was not worthy of such consideration.⁵⁵

The *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* was divided into regional subgroups. The Parisian section, responsible for the lion's share of war widows and orphans that the association looked after, was of primordial importance. This section alone took care of over 4,000 widows and nine thousand orphans in 1922, and during that year 380 beneficiaries received a total of ninety thousand francs in immediate assistance. In all, the Paris section spent over 700,000 francs on local widows and orphans that year, nearly 200,000 more than had been spent in the rest of the country by the Association's other regional sections.⁵⁶

53. AP, DX⁶ 14, File 491 *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre. Bulletin Annuel* (1926), 5-6.

54. Such a situation was common among widows in general, as the Bureau du Travail's 1907 investigation of out-workers reveals. Mrs. S., forty years old, had been married to a employee who had earned five hundred francs a month, but who had died suddenly at a young age ten years before, leaving her with her with no money. Mrs. S claimed that the work that had been required of her when her husband died was a complete shock: "I had never had to work to earn a living..." Direction du Travail, *Enquête sur le travail à domicile dans l'industrie de la lingerie. Tome I: Paris*, 664-665.

55. The Association even went so far as to allow certain widows from the provinces to join the Parisian section in order to spare them the embarrassment of being recognized in their home towns. AHAP, 1K2-9, *Notice historique sur l'Association d'Aide aux Veuves de Militaire de la Grande Guerre, 1915-1935*, 12.

56. AP, DX⁶ 22, File 987, *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre. Bulletin trimestriel: Assemblée Générale Ordinaire du 9 juin 1923*. The Parisian section did not hesitate to spend its money: during the 1923 General Assembly, the president proudly proclaimed that there was "only" 100,000 francs left in the bank because it was the Association's policy to spend to the last centime, with 2,256 widows and 5,587 orphans having received aid during the past twelve months.

The provincial sections, which were much more humble, typically became active later than the Parisian headquarters, sometimes only as the war was coming to an end. The Ninth Section, based in the town of Tours (in the Indres-et-Loir department, approximately 150 kilometres southwest of Paris) was fairly representative of the Association's regional branches. All the various sub-committees (similar to those in Paris) were operating efficiently by 1918, at which point over 1,400 widows had been enrolled. The Association was providing certain widows with homework, which it did not hesitate to remunerate very generously, and also awarded special financial aid to a few war widows, so that they could take *cures* that helped restore their health.⁵⁷

The case of one widow assisted by the Ninth Section was particularly striking: this very poor woman was seriously ill, had no job, and found herself without any resources although she was responsible for two handicapped children, a seven-year-old who was severely retarded, and a four-year-old who had not yet taken her first steps. Thanks to the intervention of the association, the mother received medical attention and her health had dramatically improved to the point where she could accept a good job in a department store. Her oldest child was in a special school while the youngest was making such remarkable progress that it seemed possible that she would soon be the equal of children of her own age. The widow in question soon became self-sufficient and was very grateful to the Association.⁵⁸ Although such a case was hardly typical and was no doubt sentimentalized and possibly exaggerated, there can be no doubt that in their own small way, such tiny regional sub-committees did what they could to assist local war widows and provided an invaluable service.⁵⁹

It is unfortunately impossible to know how many women in isolated parts of France did not have access to the same charitable services as their urban counterparts. Although the task of a charitable organization based in the provinces was the same as that of its Parisian counterpart, local demographic realities posed specific challenges. Low population density and scattered settlements created particular difficulties for those wanting to assist war widows and their

57. BDIC, O pièce 14, 150, *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre, Armées de Terre et de Mer. Assemblée générale du 2 février 1918, rapport du président et des directrices de sections pour la 9e région* (Tours: 1918), no pagination.

58. Ibid.

59. Many of the Association's sub-committees were even more humble than the one in Tours; such was the case in the Alpes-Maritimes, which assisted only fifty-nine women in 1917, all of them the widows of officers, sub-officers and corporals, most of them living in Nice. The local committee planned to start providing humble subsidies of eight francs a month to widows very soon. *Sous-comité de Nice et des Alpes Maritimes de l'Association d'aide aux Veuves de Militaires de la Grande Guerre, Assemblée Générale 1918* [BDIC Opiece 14,181].

children, many of which were to be found in the countryside (see Appendix 2).⁶⁰ During the early 1920s, leaders of the *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires* believed that it was increasingly necessary to target certain areas of the country where war widows needed more help than others, but disagreed about what this meant in practice. Certain members claimed that in small towns and in the countryside, a war widow was bound to find life easier and could get by with only her pension and subventions from the ONPN. These individuals argued that things were very different in large urban agglomerations and in those parts of the country that had been devastated during the German occupation, the high cost of living and other difficulties that afflicted widows in these areas meaning that they were bound to need supplementary assistance of one form or another.⁶¹ However, other members argued that the organization had to make greater efforts to reach rural war widows.⁶²

Certain regional sub-committees apparently made a special effort to do just this. Such was the case in the Ninth Section, where the president disagreed with the widespread belief that rural widows were better off than their urban counterparts since the cost of living in the countryside was lower. Although these women often owned a little land and had friends and family nearby to come to their aid, the president argued that making the land “provide bread” for themselves and for their children was no easy task for these women. The local association was particularly keen on giving incentives to those war widows who continued to work the land, since such work was of enormous importance to the country at the time. The national association’s founder, Baroness Lejeune, was in complete agreement with this line of thinking. The good baroness was touched by the plight of those widows who, “full of energy and courage, remained at their posts, cultivating, sowing and reaping by themselves, assisted only by their young children or by a few charitable neighbours.” It seemed to her that the least that one could do was to provide them with a little bit of money in order to encourage them to stay on the land.

60. It was only in the 1931 census that the urban population of France surpassed the rural one, and many of the “urban communes” in question were little more than large villages of two thousand people. Apart from the Parisian metropolis and a handful of cities, interbellum France was still very much a predominantly rural country. Dominique Borne and Henri Dubief, *La crise des années 30: 1929-1938*, 2d ed. (Paris: Seuil, 1989), 201, 229.

61. *Bulletin trimestriel de l'association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* no. 12 (July 1922), 24. These assertions were clearly meant to be taken on faith, and no concrete supporting evidence was provided. This was typical of national and even regional charities for war widows, which failed to analyse data from local branches to determine how the needs of the women they were helping might vary across the country. Thus, the development of the Association, like charitable organizations in general, was somewhat haphazard, and resources were not always concentrated where needs were greatest. For example, it was blatantly obvious that the local Parisian committee of the Association was much busier than the provincial ones, even taking into account the number of people for which it was responsible.

62. *Ibid.*, no. 1 (1919/1920), no pagination.

However, she insisted that the organization should also try to find jobs for those rural widows who felt that they had no choice but to move to town. Such work should pay well and, ideally, could be performed in the smallest hamlet to ensure that the countryside did not become depopulated (the baroness herself was particularly keen on basket-weaving).⁶³

The president of the Ninth Section took such advice to heart, and was sensitive to both the material and emotional needs of rural war widows. The Ninth Section gave out several hundred pieces of clothing to rural widows every year, but the President argued that the human contact provided by the Association was almost as important, and he did not hesitate to praise the work of the volunteers who visited the organization's charges:

The *correspondantes* [guardians] do not content themselves with merely distributing money and clothes, they invite widows over to their houses, or go out to find them, even in their village. From these charitable visits, which provide moral as well as material aid, is often born a reciprocal bond of affection and respect that supports, encourages and uplifts these poor women so cruelly tested by the war.⁶⁴

While it is difficult to doubt the president's sincerity, it is far less certain to what extent war widows appreciated the visits and the "moral aid" and whether or not the affection was truly mutual. However, one should not be too hasty to dismiss such acts out of hand: it is entirely possible that they were in fact sometimes appreciated in the isolated and increasingly lonely countryside.

In addition to providing assistance of various sorts, the Association concerned itself with difficulties facing war widows in a broader sense, although it did not usually take any sort of direct action or lobby the government in favour of these women. As we have seen, the Office National des Pupilles de la Nation, particularly at the departmental level, was very careful about spending its money during the first years of the administration's existence (see Chapter 2) thanks

63. BDIC, O pièce 14, 150, *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre, Armées de Terre et de Mer. Assemblée générale du 2 février 1918*. This emphasis on working the land was nothing new in France, and during the interwar period war widows were often extolled for continuing to run the family farm. Witness the "true" account of a young thirty-year-old peasant woman from Gascony who had just heard that her husband had been killed in the war. The writer asked one of her sisters how the new widow was coping with the news and was told: "Sir, what do you think has become of her? She sheds bitter tears while she works the land." Emmanuel Labat, *L'âme paysanne: la terre, la race, l'école*. (Paris: Librairie Delagrave, 1919), 252. Many politicians and public figures of various sorts—not only those belonging to the reactionary right—saw the slow process of urbanization and the abandonment of the countryside as a disaster, and would have approved of the Baroness' suggestions. Pronatalists were of course also ardent supporters of the peasantry, the only fertile sub-section of the French population. Robert O. Paxton, *French Peasant Fascism: Henri Dorgères, Greenshirts and the Crisis of French Agriculture, 1929-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 29, 175, 180-182.

64. BDIC, O pièce 14, 150, *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre, Armées de Terre et de Mer. Assemblée générale du 2 février 1918*, no pagination.

in part to misunderstandings of various sorts. The Association was quite critical of the Office's stinginess, pointing out in 1922 that the departmental offices had managed over the course of two years to save up fifty millions francs that the National Office had given them. The criticism at this point was still muted, but senior figures in the Association were quite annoyed by the departmental offices' thrift, believing that if these government agencies showed a little more generosity in helping war widows with their children's education and upkeep, their own charitable services would not be in such high demand. The Association therefore reminded widows of the various subventions that they could receive from the ONPN if their children were still minors and encouraged them to apply, perhaps hoping that the governmental agency would be obliged to loosen the purse strings if requests for aid came flooding in.⁶⁵

By the early 1920s, the Association's executive committee was alarmed by an increasing tendency in French society to downplay the hardships associated with being a war widow. The charity's leaders did not hesitate to defend their charges, arguing that "all war widows are not, as people are so ready to believe, merry widows: aside from a few...straying lambs, the vast majority of them are worthy of our affection and our support." Association leaders argued that war widows had been able to get by during the conflict and the years immediately following it, when many of them took advantage of well-remunerated jobs that were reserved for them in offices, small businesses and various companies. However, the country's economy was now deteriorating, and companies were laying off employees rather than hiring new ones: without a job, the average war widow was not going to be able to pay her steadily increasing rent with her pension cheque alone.⁶⁶

Association leaders were distressed to note that even when war widows found a job that offered a certain degree of security and relative well-being, this could become a social stigma for women who had lived a life of ease prior to the war. Such a situation occurred less often in large cities, where women of various social backgrounds "courageously" entered the labour force without eliciting any significant reproaches. However, the Association claimed to have received numerous letters from the provinces in which widows bitterly complained that once they started giving lessons, making sales calls or engaging in other remunerative activities to complement a pension, "little by little, doors were closed to them as even good friends considered it an unacceptable fall from grace for a society woman to earn a living." The Association strongly criticized such attitudes, insisting that it was necessary for all Frenchwomen to understand that

65. *Bulletin trimestriel de l'Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* no. 11 (April 1922), 12, 14.

66. *Ibid.*, no. 12 (July 1922), 10.

work, far from demeaning a woman, “elevates her and brings her honour; that for a woman to be a complete, well-rounded human being, she must have some form of employment.” Although such an extreme point of view was rare, similar attitudes were quite common among the charities devoted to war widows, a recognition of the fact that for many of these women paid work, often outside the home, had become an absolute necessity if they wanted to provide their children and themselves with a living standard that was even close to that which they had known before losing their husbands.⁶⁷ The Association was more understanding and flexible and less utilitarian on this point than members of the ONPN and politicians: philanthropists seem to have understood full well that working was often a simple necessity for war widows.

Another sign of the Association’s respect for its charges was the fact that it was clearly in favour of the enfranchisement of war widows, although it never broached the subject directly: the implicit argument was that such women, as heads of family, urgently needed this power if they wanted to safeguard their own interests and those of their children. Such a position was quite common among war widows’ associations (see page 167), who often argued that war widows deserved both the vote and governmental assistance because of their special circumstances, the sacrifice that their husbands had made and their role as mothers. The Association was more “radical” when it came to this issue, and insisted that war widows had certain fundamental rights that devolved to them as human beings.⁶⁸

The *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* remained active throughout the 1920s, although its responsibilities slowly diminished. In 1928, the organization only distributed 377,000 francs’ worth of assistance in Paris and 285,000 in the provinces. As before, a large part of this money was really being provided by other charities, including 178,000 francs from the *marainnages américains* and 127,000 from the *Fondation de la Victoire*. The Association claimed to still be taking care of over seven thousand widows and nine thousand orphans throughout the country, if only by giving them advice and providing

67. Ibid., 31. The Association was again quick to point out that this situation could be particularly problematic for women from a comfortable middle-class background who had never worked before. One such woman wrote in to describe her plight:

The distress of officers’ widows is extreme. There is no point in hiding it, the fact is that the bourgeois wife of the pre-war period was simply not ready to earn a living, we and our daughters were not prepared for the bitter struggle of daily life that we now face. God willing, our grand-daughters, having witnessed our painful struggles, will be better equipped to meet the challenge.

68. Ibid., no. 1 (1919/1920), no pagination. Even such progressive attitudes were inevitably tainted with pronatalism. The *Bulletin* claimed that “[i]t is only right and just that the widows of the heroes to whom we owe our lives have themselves the possibility of living a reasonably secure life, not only because they have the right to exist like everyone else, but also because they will play a key role in creating the young, wealthy France of tomorrow by raising their children.”

moral support. The Clothing section saw its activity decrease steadily as the years went by, although it still distributed nearly four thousand francs' worth of goods to seventy-two families in 1928. The Doll-making and Sewing sections had shut down during the course of the same year, and leaders assumed that the Children's Section would soon follow suit since war orphans were now starting to reach adulthood. In fact, this section had already changed its focus and was concentrating on guiding orphans into apprenticeships, urging widows to support their children in this endeavour despite the fact that they saw it as a new financial burden that was imposed on them just as their children were becoming capable of earning money.⁶⁹

Although this charitable organization still had a good deal of work to do by the end of the 1920s, its importance was steadily decreasing. By the early 1930s, the individuals in charge were coming around to the idea that their work would soon be done and that other charitable groups similar to theirs could provide help to those war widows and orphans who needed it. The executive committee decided to dissolve the Association in May 1934, handing over the money in their treasury to two other charitable organizations, including the *Association d'assistance médicale aux veuves et orphelins des officiers de la guerre*.⁷⁰ As the name indicates, this successor organisation concerned itself exclusively with widows of a higher social stratum. The *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires* had always given preferential treatment to middle-class women, and seems to have simply abandoned working-class and peasant war widows altogether when it ceased to exist.

The Association d'Assistance médicale aux veuves et orphelins des officiers de la guerre

The *Association d'assistance médicale aux veuves et orphelins des officiers de la guerre* was founded in 1921, several years after the *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la grande guerre*, which it would outlive for several years. As the name indicates, the organization offered medical assistance to the needy widows of officers. More specifically, it focussed its efforts on providing medical care to those widows, orphans and widowed mothers of

69. Ibid., no. 22 (June 1929), 5-6, 9-10.

70. AHAP, 1K2-9, *Notice historique sur l'Association d'aide aux veuves de militaire de la Grande Guerre, 1915-1935*, 4. The other organization that inherited the Association's money and clients was the *Fondation de la Victoire*. Madame la Maréchal Foch had created the *Fondation* to provide assistance to the widows and orphans of officers killed during the Great War, "safeguarding the dignity of women to whom the greatest respect is owed" by making certain that they would not be dependent on the "demeaning" assistance of charity. The Foundation was therefore a charitable organization that strove to present itself as something else in order to spare the feelings of the bourgeois women which it was assisting. *Bulletin trimestriel de l'Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre* no. 1 (1919/1920) no pagination.

officers who needed surgery or who suffered from tuberculosis.⁷¹ The care came in the form of hospitalization in a private clinic in Paris; although the fee could be reduced or waived altogether if the sick individual could not afford it, patients were expected to pay five francs a day if possible. Furthermore, the Association did not hesitate to charge for the transportation of the patient from her or his home to the clinic (although this fee could also be reduced or waived), indicating that its charity was of a rather peculiar kind and was reserved for those who could help themselves to a certain extent. Widows were eligible for such aid only if they had not remarried.⁷² The Association also provided medical and social assistance in cases that did not require hospitalization, with the omnipresent *dames visiteuses* going out to visit sick widows and orphans to provide them with moral support and guidance, “often accompanied by a few graceful *attentions* that brought both joy and gratitude to the poor patients.”⁷³

During the early phase of its existence, the Association had no troubles making ends meet, receiving over half a million francs’ worth of donations in 1922. Financial health was therefore not a problem, and the Association was quickly able to put together a portfolio worth about 1.5 million francs, the result of some very generous donations made to help establish this charitable organization. However, if members of the administrative council were pleased with the association’s growing resources, they were saddened and concerned by the fact that its field of action had not grown in a comparable fashion. Indeed, the Association initially found itself in the rather unusual position of being a charity that practically no one actually needed. The council claimed that the problem was that the organization and the services it provided were not sufficiently well known, in spite of a very active propaganda effort that had involved distributing thousands of leaflets all over the country. As a result, very few sick widows had yet come forth asking for help with an operation, and the Association had spent less than a fifth of its projected budget. *Faute de mieux*, the Association devoted a considerable amount of effort to removing

71. Tuberculosis was an extremely serious health problem in Third Republic France. The prevalence of incorrect diagnoses makes it difficult to know how many people it killed each year, although it seems reasonable to place the number at eighty thousand or so in the years prior to the war. Lion Murrard and Patrick Zylberman, *L’hygiène dans la République* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 482. The emphasis on tuberculosis is interesting in that a great national campaign was waged against the disease in interwar France, with the Rockefeller Foundation providing much of the funding (and even technical expertise). Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine where the Association’s financial support came from. See Lion Murrard and Patrick Zylberman, “La mission Rockefeller en France et la création du Comité de défense contre la tuberculose (1917-1923),” *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 34 (April-June 1987): 257-81.

72. *Bulletin de l’assistance médicale aux veuves et orphelins des officiers de la guerre*, no. 2 (January 1922), 1-2, 7.

73. *Ibid.*, 17.

the tonsils of orphans.⁷⁴

The people in charge of the Association need not have worried, since the situation was to change dramatically over the course of the following year. The number of widows, orphans and ascendants making use of the charity's services was soon so great that members of the administrative council were struck by the "feebleness" of their resources. Despite spending its money frugally and with careful deliberation, the Association quickly ran through its annual budget. What was even more worrying for the administrators was the marked downturn in donations, both in terms of quantity and size. The council blamed this on the spirit of the times, regretfully claiming that "as the war recedes further and further in time while the memories of the suffering and destruction that it wrought slowly fade away, the economic crisis that is wreaking havoc in all the countries of Europe is having a serious effect on the generosity of donors." A further complication lay in the fact that the Association had gone through with its plans of expanding its activities, and was providing assistance to a number of widows and orphans who were seriously ill with tuberculosis and who would only recover after long years (if at all). The council believed that its assistance in these cases was invaluable, but it was also proving to be a serious financial drain. For want of funds, the Association therefore found itself forced to choose its battles carefully.⁷⁵

Both the organization's income and expenditures rose during the following year⁷⁶ before decreasing somewhat⁷⁷ and finally stabilizing in 1923. The amount of money available to the Association and the number of people assisted did not vary a great over the next few years.⁷⁸ In fact, by 1927 the Association's president felt that greater publicity efforts were called for, since it was obvious that a large number of widows remained unaware of the organization's existence even after six years. More often than not, such widows only found out about the Association by

74. Ibid., 18, 20-23. In fact, the administrative council had decided to temporarily engage in activities beyond its normal scope of action in order to use up a certain portion of the funds that were accumulating in an embarrassing fashion, and it was because of this that one widow received a wheelchair, three others a cure at a thermal spa, and an orphan was given a glass eye. The Association had so little to do that leaders stated that if they could not find enough widows from the Great War to assist, they would be willing to extend its services to the widows of military officers who had died in other conflicts either prior to or after the war of 1914.

75. Ibid., no. 3 (January 1923), 20-22.

76. Ibid., 23-25, 27.

77. *Bulletin de l'assistance médicale aux veuves et orphelins des officiers de la guerre*, no. 4 (January 1924), 21, 27.

78. In 1924, the Association had an income of 180,000 francs and spent 140,000, with the fight against tuberculosis accounting for 87,000 francs. The organization now had a little extra money available to provide widows and orphans with medical devices such as casts, corsets and special orthopaedic shoes. Ibid., no. 6 (January 1926), 21-22.

chance when they were complaining to a friend or an acquaintance about the financial strain resulting from a recent operation or medical intervention. These women would then contact the Association and ask for assistance, usually in the form of reimbursement for the recent medical expenditures. The Association had regretfully been forced to turn aside most such requests, particularly due to the large sums involved. The organization's expenses increased somewhat during the late 1920s thanks in large part to the higher cost of living, but interest from accumulated capital had become productive enough to compensate, and a comfortable yearly surplus could now be expected.⁷⁹

Little changed until the early 1930s, when the economic crisis had an adverse effect on the resources of the Association, forcing it to reduce its expenditures. However, if the number of people who had received assistance had decreased, this was not as a result of more applicants being turned aside, and everyone who fulfilled the necessary conditions for receiving the association's help was fully satisfied. In fact, the organization was receiving fewer requests for aid, while war orphans had become self-sufficient adults with families and careers of their own, and no longer had to rely on charitable assistance in case of illness.⁸⁰ It was at this time that the *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires* dissolved itself (in 1934) and bequeathed many of its members and financial resources to the *Association d'assistance médicale*.⁸¹

Otherwise, the trend of fewer demands for assistance continued unabated, and by 1938 the Association was able to devote some of its resources to providing a few widows with "allocations." Despite some fuzzy rhetoric about preventive measures to keep such women in a state of good health, these small payments were obviously subsidies designed to supplement pensions, particularly for aged widows who had become unable to work.⁸² The number of requests that the Association fielded had decreased even more by 1940: earlier, it had been the orphans who had been asking for help less often, now it was the widows.⁸³

What did this change signify? Did these women find themselves in better health once their children had left the home and made situations for themselves, freeing them from constant worry and the need to work to supplement their pensions? It is unreasonable to assume that these widows were dying in any great numbers, since the majority of them would only have been in their forties and fifties. Whatever the reason behind the smaller number of requests, the

79. Ibid., no. 7 (January 1927), 17, 19

80. Ibid., no. 13 (January 1933), 22-23.

81. Ibid., no. 15 (January 1935), 23.

82. Ibid., no. 18 (January 1938), 22.

83. Ibid., no. 20 (January 1940), 6.

Association was taking advantage of it by being more generous with those who did ask for help, something that would have been necessary in any case due to the rising cost of living caused by the Second World War.

The activity of the *Association d'assistance médicale aux veuves de guerre* proves that middle-class war widows could have a great deal of difficulty making ends meet after losing their husbands. If their husbands had been sub-lieutenants, lieutenants, or captains, such women drew pensions worth between 1,200 and 2,200 francs a year. This may have been enough to allow widows to live on a day-to-day basis without working, but once illness struck them or their children, supplemental assistance of some sort clearly became necessary. This is particularly true when we consider that such women felt obligated to maintain a certain standard of living for themselves or their children. Regardless of how necessary this truly was, the fact is that such war widows continued to be aided even after the *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires* disbanded in 1934, while their poorer counterparts simply had to struggle on by themselves.

Charity in Disguise: *L'Assistance mutuelle des veuves de guerre*

We have seen that mutual aid societies were popular among widows prior to the Great War, and this continued to be the case afterward, since such organizations offered guaranteed supplementary financial support in the case of illness or accident.⁸⁴ Just as other mutual aid societies often had charitable overtones, so too did the post-war ones intended for war victims, with many receiving support from the government or charitable organizations. The mutual aid schemes of certain new associations were only able to function because of the generosity of a few “associate members,” who were in essence benefactors giving important donations to the organizations that allowed them to make sickness payments to poor widows. Furthermore, many associations, like private charities designed to assist war widows, received subventions of variable importance from different governmental agencies. Others could not have continued to exist without important contributions from American and French charities. Once again the historian is forced to conclude that it is all but impossible to differentiate between social welfare, charity and mutual aid in Third Republic France. A perfect example of such ambiguity can be found in the *Assistance mutuelle des veuves de guerre*.

84. A law of 3 August 1923 modified the great law on mutual aid societies of 1898 in favour of war victims, reducing the amount of time that such individuals had to spend as members before they could start drawing benefits. Furthermore, the state committed itself to paying 25% of the war victims' membership dues as long as their pension was 1,080 francs or less. *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*, 1er trimestre 1929, 33.

This organization had actually started its existence as a simple charity for war widows in October 1914, although this approach was abandoned six months later when leaders decided that while such a system did provide a real service, it could only offer short term and inefficient solutions to the problems faced by members. The organization had handed out over forty thousand francs during those six months, and while this had sometimes been very useful for sidestepping certain difficulties or making certain problems disappear, “tomorrow was never assured, and the widow that we had supposedly helped usually fell back into poverty.”⁸⁵

The heart of this association was the mutual aid society that was restricted to five hundred women and their children living in and around Paris who could be reached and monitored by a doctor working exclusively on their behalf. Membership dues were one *sou* per day, which came out to eighteen francs per year. If they fell ill, members received payments of 2½ francs per day and free medical care from a doctor and a nurse. The widows could also pay six francs per year to ensure their children, and received seventy-five centimes per day if they became sick. In case of death, a participating widow’s next of kin received one hundred francs to help defray funeral costs, while the widow herself received fifty francs for the same purposes if one of her children died.⁸⁶

A year after its creation and six months after its conversion to a mutual aid society, the *Mutuelle des Veuves* had managed to acquire a monetary reserve that would preserve it from hardships and had a membership list that was constantly growing, while the free medical services for members had proven to be a great success. During a three-month period in 1915, the association had provided medical aid to eleven of its members, who had logged a total of 159 sick days and been paid total sickness allocations of nearly five hundred francs. By the end of the year, the organization had 229 participating members, 147 aggregate ones (the children of the participating widows), seventy-four honorary ones and 248 donors; it also had 29,000 francs

85. AHAP, 1K2-9, *Assistance mutuelle des veuves de la guerre. Assemblée générale du 12 novembre 1916*, 3. The idea of mutual aid societies for military widows was hardly new. In 1859, a former French military officer published a short pamphlet explaining the need for a mutual aid society to come to the aid of the widows of deceased officers. This man explained that he had come to appreciate the extent of the deplorable situation in which a large number of officers’ families found themselves once the husband and father died. Contrary to popular belief, junior officers often came from relatively humble backgrounds and their army pay was barely enough to maintain their wives and children in a decent fashion; more often than not, the officer had not been able to economize and had little or no capital to leave his family. J.-F d’Artenn, *Exposé sur l’opportunité et les avantages qui résulteraient de: 1. une association mutuelle, en cas de prédécès, entre MM. les officiers mariés, afin d’augmenter de 2 à 300 francs par an la pension donnée à leurs veuves par l’État, association dite “la Famille militaire”*... (Paris: Imprimerie de d’Aubusson et Kugelman, 1859), no pagination.

86. AHAP, 1K2-9, *Assistance mutuelle des veuves de la guerre. Assemblée générale du 21 janvier 1921*, 4-5.

at its disposal, most of it coming from the donors.⁸⁷ The association claimed that it was economically viable, but honorary members contributed nearly as much as the regular ones did with their dues, which was helping the organization build up a handy little surplus.

The fact is that the association was not wanting for recognition or assistance from the very highest levels of government. During the first year of its existence, Alexandre Millerand, the Minister of War, had been an honorary member, and in 1915 the President of the Republic himself, Raymond Poincaré, joined up. This pleased the preening members of the hierarchy to no end, and they were all the more proud since they “had asked for nothing of the sort.”⁸⁸

The heads of the Association were quite boastful when it came to the exclusivity of their organization. They claimed that there was still a great deal of misunderstanding about mutual aid societies in general, with people seeming to believe that any war widow who was able and willing to pay eighteen francs a year could join up. However, there was a permanent limit of five hundred participating members and one thousand aggregate ones (orphans). Furthermore, the Association demanded very strict moral standards from its members: “from the widow of the simple soldier to the widow of a high-ranking colonel, we want an exemplary life, an honour that is above reproach.” The proof of such unimpeachable morality was actively sought out by the *dames visiteuses* who were responsible for knowing every member of the association.⁸⁹

In spite of such exclusiveness and concern over the morality of its members, the Association had to contend with widespread prejudice in many parts of the country where the idea of mutual aid was not popular. War widows were afraid of what their friends and neighbours might say about them if they found out that they had joined such an organization: “they prefer to suffer rather than be in the Mutual; these people remain unaware of the true meaning of mutual aid, of the beauty and the nobility of the liberating gesture implied in the words: one for all, and all for one!” The association’s president believed that it was necessary for some prominent women in the military world, such as the wives of high-ranking officers, to speak out in favour of mutual aid associations to convince and reassure timid and fearful war widows that there was nothing shameful or demeaning about banding together to help themselves. It was up to these elite women to destroy a prejudice that had already fallen by the wayside in Paris but still held sway in the provinces, by explaining that assistance was always unpredictable and precarious. Such assistance, although it seemed harmless enough at first

87. Ibid., *Assemblée générale du 21 novembre 1915*, 3-4, 7-8.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid., 6. The insistence on having no more than five hundred members was a rather odd one, since more members would have helped make the association economically viable.

glance, was flawed for many reasons: it was almost always ineffective, it depended on the good will or the passing fancy of the person or institution that accorded or refused it. But the allocation that the member of a mutual aid society received was the result of a right that she had acquired after paying her entry dues and membership fees on a regular basis, and such a right could not be simply abrogated on a whim. Thus, the mutual aid society, unlike other forms of assistance, was more properly seen as an “instrument of liberty, of dignity and independence.”⁹⁰ This spirited defence of mutual aid societies ignored the harsh fact that the *Mutuelle des veuves de guerre* was only viable during these first few months because of what were essentially charitable contributions. Did the president hope that self-sufficiency would be genuinely possible once the membership had grown large enough, or was she knowingly engaging in a bit of deceit?

The *Mutuelle* had various sections similar to those of other charities, which helped to make its own true nature quite clear. The work section had been born of the need “to find a remunerating occupation for women who had no lucrative trade or profession, and for whom we were unable to find a suitable employment,” and for widows who also wished to spend as much time as possible at home with their children. At first, five or six members were gathered to manufacture a few “tasteful” *objets* such as paintings, pieces of embroidery and girdles. Once orders for such items started coming in, it had been possible to increase the number of women working in the section, which had risen to forty. The *Mutuelle* had paid these women 7,400 francs during the past year, which also witnessed the development of a private clientele of Frenchwomen and foreigners, ensuring that this endeavour could continue for some time while more workers were hired.⁹¹ The next year, the section sold over 77,000 francs’ worth of objects and paid out over twenty-two thousand francs in salary.⁹² By 1921, the workshop was providing employment for over a hundred widows and had branched out to include the fabrication of such various products as lacquered boxes, tables, porcelain, handbags, miniatures, hand-fans, etc. According to the association’s cheerful and upbeat yearly account, these products were exported to the four corners of the globe, where they served to reinforce the French reputation for quality

90. Ibid., 6-7. The President never tired of extolling the virtues of mutual aid: “It is by this idea that the widows who came to us are united, having found in our statutes guarantees that will safeguard their moral dignity, giving them the certainty that they will constantly be treated as equal and free members of a grouping created through their will and sustained by their votes.” Ibid., *Assistance mutuelle des veuves de guerre, Assemblée générale du 18 novembre 1917*, 4.

91. AHAP, 1K2-9, *Assistance Mutuelle des Veuves de la Guerre. Assemblée générale du 21 novembre 1915*, 15.

92. Ibid., *Assemblée générale du 12 novembre 1916*, 11.

and good taste.⁹³

The association also had a section responsible for handing out items of used clothing to needy widows and orphans, which had given out linen, dresses, coats and shoes to fifty-three widows and ninety-five children during the first four months that it had been in operation. Plans were also afoot to create a sponsorship (*parainage*) system, whereby a philanthropic outsider would provide for the education of an orphan belonging to a member. In addition, the association also ran vacation colonies and distributed bursaries to war orphans.⁹⁴ By the early 1920s, the association was increasingly shifting its attention to orphans' education, and trying to provide them with the schooling that their deceased fathers would have wanted them to have. It was for this very purpose that the organization began funnelling money from various American charities, which had provided over four hundred thousand francs by 1921 to help widows pay for their children's education.⁹⁵

The association did not ignore the more intangible need for fellowship of its charges. Informal gatherings were organized every two weeks to give members and their children the chance to meet each other and talk to the association leaders, as the following paternalistic description suggests:

We only offer them the consolation of finding themselves together with other women in the same situation; they can speak to us of their difficulties, of their sorrow, of everything and anything that interests them, and it seems that this provides them with real satisfaction, since they come in large numbers and their children are the first to remind their mothers of these gatherings."⁹⁶

The association's founders had ambitious plans for the little organization: "Certainly, when one thinks of all those who are suffering and who are in need of help, what is it to protect a mere five hundred widows and a thousand orphans from sickness?...But we hope with all our hearts that this is merely the beginning."⁹⁷ However, we lose sight of this fascinating mutual aid society after 1921, and it is unlikely that such lofty goals were achieved. A hybrid of widows' association, mutual aid society and charity, the *Assistance mutuelle* may not have been needed

93. Ibid., *Assemblée générale du 21 janvier 1921*, 9.

94. Ibid., *Assemblée générale du 21 novembre 1915*, 8, 15-16.

95. Ibid., *Assemblée générale du 21 janvier 1921*, 10-11. In theory, this was exactly what the National Office of the Wards of the Nation was supposed to be doing: the fact that a charity was helping war orphans with their education suggests that the ONPN was not managing to assist all the children in its care.

96. Ibid., *Assemblée générale du 21 novembre 1915*, 12.

97. Ibid., 20.

once the ONPN had become organized during the early 1920s.⁹⁸

As the Great War receded into the past during the 1920s and 1930s, war widows and their children seemed to need less help than before as charities devoted to helping them disappeared or narrowed their field of activity as a result of fewer demands for assistance. The continued activity and advocacy of the war widows' associational movement (see Chapter 4) during the 1930s shows that many such women still faced grave difficulties even twenty years after the Armistice, despite the fact that they had largely faded from the public eye. However, the simple fact was that as war orphans grew due to adulthood and ceased to be dependent, their mothers' plights were significantly eased. Although the economic climate of the 1930s was grim, with over one million people unemployed in 1935 and the peasantry's living standards plummeting,⁹⁹ war widows were apparently better off than they had been during the preceding decade.

Those dark years that followed the war had witnessed a massive charitable mobilization dedicated to easing the perceived suffering of war widows and orphans, whose plight was still very much in the public eye. Philanthropists and more humble individuals in France and abroad donated large sums of money that numerous charitable organizations distributed to those widows who were considered to be neediest. The number of such charities and the amount of money that they spent, both in urban centres and in the countryside, served as an eloquent testimony to the inadequacy of the tentative social welfare measures designed to assist war widows and their children. The foregoing has made clear that the separation between public welfare and private charity in Third Republic France was rarely absolute or clearly defined. Extensive charitable activity, often of a religious nature, was necessary to compensate for inadequate social services and to alleviate the misery of the least fortunate members of society during the first half of the twentieth century, and this was equally true when it came to war widows and their children.

Charities and government agencies often saw and treated widows in similar ways. Both were imbued with a thoroughly middle-class attitude of paternalism towards the women in their

98. Similar organizations that combined the functions of associations and charities included the *Association nationale française pour la protection des familles des morts pour la patrie*. Created in 1915, this organization, which insisted on the importance of keeping children with their mothers whenever possible, was approved of and encouraged by the French episcopate and by the ministers of the various Protestant Churches. The Association provided free medical consultations, job placements, apprenticeship, vacation colonies, and so forth. Most of the association's revenues came from the *Société américaine*, the *Comité d'attribution de la journée des orphelins* (see page 114) and the *marainnages américains*. AHAP, 1K2-9, *Association nationale française pour la protection des familles des morts pour la patrie*.

99. Borne and Dubief, *La crise des années 30*, 37, 43.

care, and tended to treat widows as little more than children. Both the government agencies and charities saw themselves as replacements for a lost husband, an attitude that could reduce war widows to the role of passive and grateful junior partners. While it is difficult to make generalizations about charitable organizations because they were such a heterogenous lot, they resembled government agencies in the ambivalence towards their charges. For example, the *Association d'aide aux veuves de militaires* sometimes treated war widows with a considerable amount of respect, and was particularly understanding when it came to issues such as the need to work and female suffrage. Yet at other times the organization could be incredibly patronizing and saw the women it helped in much the same light as the most religious of charities. The middle-class bias of philanthropic organizations, similar to that of the ONPN, was made manifest in their emphasis on the needs of bourgeois widows to maintain a "respectable" standard of living. While the activity of the *Association d'assistance médicale aux veuves de guerre* makes it clear that the needs of these women were often very real, this sort of prioritization on the part of charities meant that their limited resources were unevenly spread out among their charges, and that the middle-class widow's need for "respectability" could easily deprive her working-class or peasant counterpart of basic necessities. Charities also usually attached as much importance to the morality of their charges as the ONPN did, the role of the *dames visiteuses* clearly being to ensure that war widows were behaving in an "appropriate" fashion and living up to an ideal image. Finally, most charities often shared the government agencies' unsavoury tendency to understand "widow" (and therefore "woman") to mean "mother:" here too, pronatalist sentiment was never far beneath the surface and it was never completely clear just how important the war widow herself was to the philanthropists. Given such treatment, it is little wonder that certain war widows came to feel the need to form their own organizations to represent their interests.

4: WAR WIDOWS' ASSOCIATIONS

Many war widows simply faced the future with stoicism and equanimity and did not see fit to complain about their lot in life. They looked at their situation with resignation, knowing full well that their husbands could easily have died at home while working in the field or in a factory, in which case they would not have received any sort of compensation at all. Eight hundred francs a year did not represent a fortune, but it was certainly better than nothing, and asking the government for more either in terms of money or other forms of assistance must often have seemed futile. However, other women in the same position were outraged at what they perceived as shameless neglect on the part of the government. As they saw it, their husbands had given their lives to save France, and it was clear to them that the state owed the families of these men much more than eight hundred francs a year. Faced with such challenges, these women were not content to simply sit back quietly and meekly accept whatever politicians and bureaucrats decided to give them. Many of them banded together in associations to offer each other material and emotional support and to lobby the government.

Above all, these associations serve to highlight the tensions and contradictions that arose around war widows' pensions during the interwar period, and the extent to which traditional world views continued to exist side-by-side with a new conception of the state. The very existence of such associations implied a new understanding of the government's role and of its responsibilities towards Frenchwomen and Frenchmen. However, war widows often justified their demands by putting forth traditional feminine imagery in the form of the stereotypical war widow. While the associations that we will be looking at reveal little about war widows themselves, they will show how a few such women tried to exercise some control over the new state apparatuses. These attempts are indicative of broader difficulties experienced by women dealing with a welfare state to which they did not truly belong since they were not citizens. This state often appeared to concern itself with them only because of their role as mothers, and it was only by exploiting this natalist mentality that they could derive any benefits from it. Many war widows, like French women generally, came to understand that the government would only become more responsive to their needs if they acquired the franchise and became full citizens.

A large number of small organizations devoted to war widows existed at the communal and departmental level throughout France by the Armistice, and many of these soon become members of a loose-knit federation representing war victims throughout the country.¹ While

1. Such initiatives were part of a wider movement that saw war victims and veterans create organizations to defend their rights, and particularly to lobby for higher pensions. See Antoine Prost, *Les anciens*

most war widows' associations were secular, a few had an expressly religious character. The Catholic Union of War Widows was fiercely sectarian and downright reactionary, and will demonstrate that religion still played a role in interwar French society. However, it is significant that despite the suspicion and hostility that its fanaticism must have engendered in other organizations, the Catholic Union did cooperate with the widows' associational movement on many issues.

These associations began by incessantly lobbying the government for higher pensions for war widows and their children, but by the early 1920s, much of their energy was devoted to simply demanding readjustments as the franc's value fell and pensions became worth less and less (see page 73). One great goal of the widows' associations throughout the 1920s was to have a widow's pension recognized as the legal equivalent of one awarded to a wounded veteran who was deemed to be 50% disabled. Association leaders argued that such an arrangement had several advantages, including speedier adjustments of pension rates since disabled veterans normally received increases to their pensions before war widows.² This objective was achieved in 1929 after a decade of struggle and was perhaps the greatest triumph of the war widows' organizational movement. The associations also wanted the government to provide war widows with a variety of other advantages, including more generous subventions for the Wards of the Nation and reserved employment. These lobbying efforts were often accompanied by criticism of the government, its various agencies and the general public for their perceived callousness and disregard for the plight of war widows.³

Despite the associations' efforts, the government was often less than responsive to their lobbying efforts, and many women in the movement began to believe that something more was needed. Associational leaders concluded that war widows simply did not rank very high on politicians' lists of priorities because they could not vote (although the associations' small membership base, a source of constant concern for leaders, also certainly had something to do with this). These women argued that other war victims, such as disabled veterans, received favourable treatment from the government because they could use their ballots as leverage. Most of the associations examined below therefore came out strongly in favour of female suffrage by the mid-20s, and also tended to uphold a broader feminist agenda whose ultimate aim was to

combattants et la société française.

2. See for example *Bulletin de l'Union catholique des veuves de la guerre*, January-February 1928, 2-3.

3. Although advocacy was their bread and butter, the associations also played an invaluable role in providing their members with information of various sorts that could be of use to them, which was usually made available in a little monthly or quarterly publication.

gain women full civic status.

The postwar period was the heyday of the widows' associations, whose activity diminished somewhat during the 1930s. As we have just seen, once the children of war widows reached adulthood and began leaving the home, these women's lives often became somewhat less difficult. However, obstacles and hardships of various sorts still abounded, and the associations strove to make the government and the public aware of these. The organizations were particularly concerned with the lack of suitable work available for war widows, and were becoming increasingly aware that many of these women had to rely on poorly paid outwork when they could find employment at all. The associations also worried that for certain war widows, the departure of children from the home was of little help since their health had been ruined by overwork. Finally, perhaps motivated by the worsening international situation, certain associations allowed themselves to express their pacifist leanings, which relied heavily on the old notion of women as natural enemies of war.

One particularly contentious issue to face war widows' associations was the fate of those among them who remarried, a common situation that threatened to destroy the idealized image of the war widow. Three hundred thousand war widows had already chosen the path of remarriage by the time of the 1921 census (see Appendix 2), and others followed in their footsteps during the next few years. The associations representing war widows were almost unanimous in condemning the 1925 decision that froze the pensions of remarried war widows, lobbying for the new law to be overturned and warning their members that the government hoped to eliminate the pensions of remarried widows altogether. On the whole, the associations did not see war widows' pensions as a form of charity that was only to be made available when needed, but as a right that their husbands had paid for with their lives.⁴ The position of the associations was also motivated by a strong sense of solidarity and the belief that a budget-conscious government was eager to cut expenses wherever it could and would not hesitate to start decreasing or eliminating the pensions of other war victims. While the majority of associations were supportive of remarried widows, we will see that some of these women felt the need to belong to specialized organizations which could more easily meet their needs.

The issue of remarriage was delicate for the associations largely because they had come

4. This tendency was most visible in organizations that did not hesitate to criticize the government, such as the Corrèze Association (see below), which referred to pensions as a "debt" for which the State was responsible and "rights whose immortal nature is solemnly affirmed by its inscription in the 'Great Book of Public Debt.'" *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*. (1er trimestre 1928, 9; October-November-December 1925, 16; 3e et 4e semestre 1932, 21).

to rely on a stereotypical image of the war widow in order to influence the government and public opinion. This paragon of female virtue was often portrayed as eternally faithful, and remarriage almost implied a sort of betrayal or infidelity towards the idealized deceased husband, all of which was reminiscent of the literary clichés of the period (see pages 9-10). The associations depicted this figure first and foremost as a victim, an innocent and weak woman against whom fate had struck a savage blow. It came to be axiomatic that a war widow was also a mother, and that she would do whatever was necessary to ensure the safety and well-being of her offspring. Inspired by her unselfish love and her devotion to the memory of the “fallen hero,” the war widow struggled to eke out a living for herself and raise her children decently.⁵ There was some variation in the way that this image was employed, with certain organizations, particularly the Catholic Union, taking it to its most grotesque extreme and adding religious obsession to the mix.⁶ Most associations were more flexible and sometimes allowed this fictional widow a certain level of agency, but all used this pathos-ridden image with great regularity in an attempt to shame politicians into doing the right thing.⁷ Such poetic license is understandable, but has the unfortunate effect of obscuring the real suffering and hardships of war widows that the historian is interested in. Furthermore, the use of such imagery could easily become a trap, portraying widows as weak women unworthy of the franchise or incapable of exercising any sort of responsibility. The associations walked a fine line between fighting for their members’ rights and showing these women as passive victims.

5. The following quote from an ultra-Catholic widows’ association nicely sums up this prevalent attitude in spite of the added religious dimension: “The Christian widow...overcoming her pain thanks to her faith and the love that continues to burn in her heart for the dearly departed, will have the strength to see her task through to the end. It is she who will ensure that the living memory of their father is ever present before her children. *She will forget herself and will find her joy in living for others* [emphasis mine].” *Bulletin de l’Union catholique des veuves de la guerre du Sud-Est, Comité de Tarare* (1926), 5.

6. The Union’s leadership clearly saw widowhood in religious terms and talked about it as an almost desirable condition: “Doubtless, the Good Lord treats our Association as a privileged child, since suffering was the destiny that He reserved for his only Son and to which He attached the greatest significance.” However, the ecstatic self-flagellation should not obscure the fact that the association demonstrated a genuine desire to help war widows. *Bulletin de l’union catholique des veuves de la guerre*, March-April 1927, 1.

7. The following example of rhetoric from 1928 is fairly typical:

By giving her husband to the nation, the widow lost everything: her situation, her home, her peace of mind and her material comfort. Left suddenly alone...[s]he had no choice but to abandon her home for long hours every day, and often had the horrible experience of watching as poverty and want took hold in that home, where material comfort had once been the rule. She had to forego her natural duty as supervisor of her children’s education, and instead burden herself with worries and suffer many privations that often left her health ruined.

Bulletin de l’Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre, 4e trimestre 1928, 17.

However, most associations realized that the vast majority of war widows they represented were poor women from the peasantry and working class for whom remarriage represented the best chance of returning to a relatively comfortable standard of existence. The associations therefore implicitly acknowledged that the idealized war widow was a middle-class construct that could not easily be reconciled with the harsh needs of most real war widows.

Ultimately of course, the efforts of the war widows' associations were largely in vain, and their interest resides not so much in what they accomplished as in the new outlook and mentality that they represented. These women believed that the state owed them something, and they had no qualms about asking for it boldly since they felt that justice was on their side. Such a conviction, although it resulted from the exceptional circumstances surrounding their husbands' deaths, helped mark the complex and confused transition from charity to welfare that occurred in the aftermath of the First World War.

The Associations and Advocacy in the 1920s: Defending the Defenceless

By the 1920s, local associations were well-established and could devote their efforts to advocacy on behalf of their members, although they often remained concerned about the size of this membership and the resulting lack of influence. They levelled a great deal of criticism at government initiatives supposedly designed to ease the plight of war widows, such as subventions to the Wards of the Nation and reserved employment. However, the associations focussed most of their attention on pensions, and they found themselves repeatedly disappointed in this respect. Organizations were ambivalent about the revisions of 1925 (see page 74), approving of the higher pension rates but disheartened by what they saw as preferential treatments for other war victims. The associations' dissatisfaction with government increased during the second half of the decade, although cautious optimism had once again become the order of the day by 1930 thanks to some minor victories.

We will begin by looking at three local associations based in rural France that typified such organizations during the 1920s. Those in Corrèze and Charente were representative of apolitical, mainstream widows' associations: both were affiliated with the Federal Union of French Associations of War Veterans, Disabled Veterans, Widows, Orphans and Ascendents, a large national federation grouping organizations representing war victims from all over the country.⁸ A third organization, the Federation of War Widows, based in the Gard, was more

8. Affiliates of the *Union fédérale des associations françaises des mutilés, réformés, veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre* followed a common policy and their publications had a great deal of overlapping content, much of which was provided by the Union in Paris.

conservative and idiosyncratic, but sounded much like its counterparts when it came to most issues.

These associations were rather small, much to the chagrin of their leaders, who firmly believed that they could only be successful if it was clear that they represented the majority of war widows. The Departmental Association of the War Widows of the Charente-Inférieure was quite concerned about membership issues. Its leaders were disappointed that by the mid-20s only a thousand or so of the six thousand war widows in the small, rural department in southwestern France belonged to the Association. They bemoaned this fact and argued that the Association should have grouped together the majority of the department's war widows since "there is strength in numbers." The Association distributed its publication to members free of charge, hoping that widows would lend the little *Bulletin* to other women after having read it and help spread the word about the organization. Association leaders argued that the 1925 readjustment of government pension rates had been due to the efficient lobbying of various associations grouped together in a committee that represented an important number of war victims. The message could not have been more clear: in order to make their voices heard by the government that controlled the purse-strings, war widows had to show a united front by joining an association.⁹

The Association's tone became increasingly bitter as the situation of war widows failed to improve. In 1927, association leaders eyed the future with despair, believing that war widows' demand to have their pensions based on a 50% invalidity rate would not come to fruition since "members of Parliament have better things to do with their time than worry about the wives of the war dead." The Association considered it self-evident that war widows, in spite of the "privileged nature of the debt owed them," were ranked lowest among state pensioners since the government was apparently much more willing to increase the pensions of disabled veterans than those of widows. The organization's president penned an angry tirade against the perceived selfishness of certain war widows that made such oversights possible:

A large number of widows (the greatest part, alas) seem completely indifferent to our efforts and have remained aloof from the battle that we incessantly wage; they do not spend a single moment worrying about the fact that everywhere around them so many women are suffering and dying or living in misery, victims of these carefree widows'

9. *Bulletin périodique de l'Association départementale des veuves de guerre de la Charente-Inférieure* no. 1 (June 1925), 1-2. The enthusiasm of local widows in general left something to be desired. During the same harangue, the secretary-general expressed her regret that war widows were not more interested in public manifestations, such as those that took place on 11 November and had such an important symbolic value. She asked widows to walk side-by-side with the other organizations of war victims rather than follow in their wake.

egoism, women to whom fate has granted financial security and good health and who therefore need nothing. These well-off widows refused to understand that their adhesion would put more weight behind the demands that we present to the government and would practically guarantee their success.

The president concluded by venomously accusing these fortunate war widows of being too selfish to pay 5½ francs' worth of membership dues.¹⁰

The membership situation certainly did not improve over the next few years, and by the end of the 1920s the *Bulletin* could claim that of the twenty thousand war widows, orphans and ascendants in the department, less than two thousand were members of the Association. The organization therefore initiated a recruitment scheme whereby everyone who managed to recruit five new members would receive a five-year subscription to the *Journal des Mutilés*, which was worth sixteen francs. Based on the ensuing silence, it is safe to assume that this ploy was not a great success and that the majority of war victims in the department did not feel any need to join the Association.¹¹

The Departmental Association of War Widows, Orphans and Ascendants of Corrèze was also negligible in size,¹² and low membership was an almost constant concern. The 1924 general assembly in the departmental capital of Tulle (a small town half-way between Lyon and Bordeaux) gathered only a hundred or so of the Association's nine hundred adherents. The president, widow Vacher, did not hide her disappointment with this turnout, and expressed the hope that members would in the future participate more actively in the life of the association. She went on to proclaim that members also had to increase their propaganda efforts, since there were over two thousand war widows in the department who were not yet members of the organization. Vacher, like her counterpart in the Charente, argued that there was strength in numbers and that it was for that very reason that the Association had long been affiliated with the Federal Union, which had over three hundred thousand members throughout France.¹³

In spite of their limited means and small memberships, these associations actively assisted local war widows in a variety of ways. Perhaps most significant were their interventions

10. Ibid., no. 7, 1-2. Given the rural and relatively impoverished nature of the department, it is unlikely that the majority of these recalcitrant souls were the fortunate widows that the Association's president railed against.

11. Ibid., no. 12, 1.

12. In 1924, the Association had a turnover of 11,250 francs, thanks in part to a 1,500 franc subvention from the Office National des Mutilés, and 4,400 francs' worth of expenditures, which included about 1,500 francs given to sick or needy widows and orphans. *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*, Oct-Nov-Dec 1925, 8.

13. Ibid., January 1925, 10-11.

before pension tribunals in favour of widows who were appealing after their requests had been rejected by the Minister of Pensions: thanks to the Associations, a “few” of these appeals were successful. The organizations were also frequently called upon to lobby the Prefecture and local senior civil servants to ensure that members applying for reserved jobs received a fair hearing. These associations were also represented in all the services that were responsible for war victims, namely the departmental sections of the *Office National des Mutilés* (a government agency created during the war to assist disabled veterans in various ways) and the Wards of the Nation: in Corrèze, there were three war widows in each of these offices, while one was a member of the permanent section of the Office des Mutilés, and three held the same positions with the Wards. In addition, Vacher was able to boast that she had managed to have seventy-six war widows and ascendants elected as members of the cantonal sections of the ONPN, something that she considered perfectly natural since “it is only fair and just that such people help guide orphans.”¹⁴ The associations also exerted pressure on local governmental agencies in various ways to defend the interests of war widows and orphans. Again in the Charente, Vacher repeatedly intervened to ensure that Wards of the Nation found work with the administration despite some difficulties. Vacher also used her influence when the government was making decisions regarding the allocation of tobacco shops, seeing to it that nineteen of the twenty-five franchises handed out in the department went to war widows.¹⁵

Fighting for the rights of war widows and advocating their cause often meant criticizing government policy. In the Charente, Vacher was certainly not afraid to speak her mind when it came to the government’s stance on augmenting pensions. Although satisfied with the Chamber’s 1925 decision to increase widows’ pensions by 80%, she was unhappy that the widow’s basic pension remained 800 francs, whereas the Federal Union had been lobbying to

14. Ibid., 13-14.

15. Ibid., October-November-December 1925, 5. The practice of allocating tobacco shops to war widows dated from the Empire, when Napoleon had created a national tobacco monopoly and decreed that retail sales should be in the hands of family members of civil servants and soldiers, serving as rewards for services rendered unto the nation. During the nineteenth century, these were more and more often awarded to the widows of military officers. The owners often did not get personally involved in the running of the tobacco shop, choosing instead to hire a manager who operated the store and paid them a regular royalty fee of sorts. The manager’s payment to the owner was somewhere between 1.5 and 1.8% of total sales, meaning that it was impossible for a tobacco merchant to make a living by selling tobacco products alone: the profession was often a mere sideline, usually a sort of annex to the manager’s real commerce as café owner. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know how widespread this practice still was after the Great War. *Encyclopédie du tabac et des fumeurs* (Paris: Le Temps, 1975), 272; Alfred Lamarque, *Le monopole des tabacs: offices d’état ou liberté?* (Paris: Librairie Octave Droin, 1927), 76, 80.

have this increased to 1,200 francs.¹⁶ Vacher also considered it grossly unfair that widows would now be receiving only an additional 540 francs per year per child, while an invalid veteran would receive 740. For Vacher, it was obvious that the government was taking advantage of war widows: "Compare these figures for yourselves and you will see that we are eternal sacrifices." She scoffed at the excuses presented by the government, which had repeatedly claimed that it needed money before it could help those in need: "Money can always be found when the government needs it. They didn't have problems getting their hands on money during the war when they needed to make cannons; why is it that there isn't any more of it when it's a question of keeping alive the little children, widows and parents of those the war killed?"¹⁷ Vacher did more than simply complain: it did not take her long to contact all the Senators from the department, who appeared willing and eager to correct what they themselves perceived as an injustice.

The leaders of widows' associations were also often upset by the ONPN's decisions, especially when these affected widowed mothers directly. Members of the Charente organization were pleased by the gains widows made in 1925, when their pensions and child allocations were increased. However, they were disappointed to notice that in many cases the government was taking away with one hand what it was giving with the other. They pointed out that about five-hundred subventions for upkeep provided by the ONPN had recently been suppressed in the department. Association leaders found this turn of events regrettable, arguing that "at a time when the cost of living is so very high, a few hundred francs a year can give great pleasure to all those widows who, working as modest employees or even simple day-labourers, have minimal earnings." The majority of these widows were undoubtedly disappointed, but the few extra hundred francs a year were certainly more than just a nice little "extra" for many of them, representing the difference between self-sufficiency and indigence. The Association proclaimed that all widows' associations would have to be vigilant over the coming months and demand that the government not be so stingy when passing the next budget.¹⁸

This intransigence on the part of the small local associations was fully supported at the national level. In 1926, Widow Callarec,¹⁹ the vice-president of the Federal Union, strongly

16. The system of pension adjustments was extremely complex, and involved adding supplements of various sorts to a basic pension rate. Alfred Sauvy, *Histoire économique de la France*, 184.

17. *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*, April-May-June 1925, 5, 8.

18. *Bulletin périodique de l'Association départementale des veuves de guerre de la Charente-Inférieure*, no. 3 (no date), 1-2.

19. Callarec also sat on the High Council of the ONPN (see page 99).

criticized the changes taking place at the ONPN: "War orphans are most certainly not the spoiled children of the French Parliament that the very title "Ward of the Nation," bestowed by one of the finest laws ever passed by the Republic, might suggest." According to Callarec, every time that a legitimate concern of the Wards had been presented to elected officials, a full-blown mobilization of war victims' and veterans' associations had been necessary to obtain satisfaction. Callarec was bitter about the cuts in the ONPN's budget and the effects that these had had on war orphans across the country, depriving them and their mothers of certain invaluable advantages, such as free meals in the school canteen, supervised studies, free school supplies, and summer camps. Callarec claimed that even scholarships and bursaries were under attack, while reductions that had been announced as provisory had become permanent. According to her, these factors were helping to create "lamentable" situations for certain war widows and their children, which were only aggravated by the Office's habit of handing out subventions months after they were due.²⁰

The Federation of War Widows, based in the Gard, a rural department along the Mediterranean coast, was often as critical of the government's attempts to help war widows as its counterparts. The Federation's leaders were particularly unhappy that the law of January 1923 on reserved employment had not done more to assist such war widows who were looking for work, arguing that the government could certainly have found more jobs if it had tried harder. To begin with, the effort exerted had obviously been uneven since the Ministry of Finance had been able to offer nearly thirty job openings to widows, while the Ministries of War and Foreign Affairs had only scrounged up one apiece. To compound the problem of scarcity, many of the reserved posts were less than ideal for a variety of reasons. A large number of the openings were for stenographers and typists, but this was of no help to women who did not possess these skills. Even more problematic was the fact that the majority of the jobs were in Paris, which made them unappealing to most war widows living outside the Île-de-France who were reluctant to leave their homes. Furthermore, many of the best and highest-paying posts were unattainable for the majority of war widows since they required applicants to write examinations that were often too difficult for women who had finished their education years ago and who simply did not have the time to study in preparation. Finally, widows had to go to the local departmental capital to write these examinations, but the government did not reimburse the travel expenses (candidates for jobs involving typing even had to bring their own machines with them). The Federation

20. *Bulletin périodique de l'Association départementale des veuves de guerre de la Charente-Inférieure*, no. 3 (no date), 3.

criticized the government for going out of its way to be as unhelpful as possible and argued that the requirements of the legislation failed to match the spirit that underpinned the law.²¹

For widows' associations, lobbying and criticizing the government went hand-in-hand with trying to raise awareness regarding the difficulties these women faced, although these attempts often veered into melodrama. The organizations regularly championed war widows whose health was in jeopardy after caring for a chronically ill husband, a scenario rich in pathos. In 1926, the Corrèze Association expressed concern at the long wait faced by certain widows before their husband's pension devolved to them, especially in the case of gassed soldiers who developed tuberculosis several years after the war. This was supposedly "a matter of determining whether we can protect the health of these women and keep them from sharing the fate of their deceased husband." The Association claimed that most of these widows had just spent several months in close contact with contagious tuberculosis patients and had exhausted themselves by taking care of them. It was quite probable that they had been infected and now found themselves in a dangerous position where they needed to be able to eat decently and rest if they were to have any chance of avoiding the worst. The Association argued that the state should ensure that these women and their children received their pension within a reasonable delay, so that they could recuperate from their trying ordeal and avoid fatally over-straining themselves. The alternative was to make them wait for financial support, condemning them to weeks or months of poverty that would become death sentences.²²

Such cases were obviously rare, as were the tragedies involving war widows that the associations sometimes reported on in order to emphasize the plight of these women. Nevertheless, the organizations took an almost morbid delight in recounting these grim tales of woe. To give but one example, in the fall of 1926 the Federation of War Widows' *Journal* described how a Madame Jeanne Gardon, a thirty-one year-old war widow, had left her small village and abandoned the two young children whose survival she could no longer insure. Having arrived in nearby Roubaix, she was unable to find the employment she had been hoping for, and, "weary of suffering and struggling," she used her last bit of money to purchase laudanum. After having written a moving letter to her children, she pinned the paper to her chest

21. *Journal des veuves de guerre (Organe de la Fédération des Veuves de Guerre)* no. 3 (February 1925), no pagination. The Federation of War Widows is particularly interesting because of its unconventional attitude towards remarried widows and women's rights, which will be examined in later sections. As far as pensions and general advocacy for war widows was concerned, the organization's views did not differ greatly from those of its counterparts in Corrèze and the Charente.

22. *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*, 1er trimestre 1926, 8-9.

and drank the poison. Overcome with agony, she collapsed in the middle of a crowded square in the town centre, where passers-by rushed to her aid. A doctor administered an antidote and had her transported to a nearby hospital, but to no avail.²³ Although the terse article was not accompanied by any editorial material, the intent of such a dramatic piece is clear. Whether using such an extreme case to draw attention to the much more mundane suffering of war widows was legitimate or effective is another question altogether.

The pension revaluation of 1928²⁴ created much discontent among widows' associations. Outrage and bitterness were the order of the day for the Corrèze Association when the new pension rates were made public, the president claiming once again that it was quite clear that among those who benefited from a state pension, widows were the least favoured. She noted that widows' pensions, which were now just under 1,700 francs a year, had increased only threefold since 1914, while those of disabled veterans had increased over fivefold. The president questioned the politicians' priorities and argued that at the very least some of the money that was being saved by not increasing widows' pensions should be made available to them in some other form, "to complement the far too humble pensions that are more often than not these women's only financial resource once the children had left the home and sickness and old age prevented the widow from working."²⁵

The Association's mood was more upbeat by the end of the year, as the government's provisional budget addressed many of the organization's grievances. The president hoped that the improvements that this budget would bring about would serve to highlight the "cruel situation" in which many widows had found themselves during recent years. The most important proposed change was the long awaited adjustment of widows' pensions to bring them into line with those of an invalid veteran drawing a 50% invalidity pension: no longer would this simply be a theoretical principle, but a reality. The president reminded readers that this law would affect hundreds of thousands of war widows, and would serve to reestablish equal treatment between the widows of civil servants and career military men who always received at least half the pension that their husbands had been awarded. The president insisted that these proposed changes were long overdue: "as legitimate as are the demands of all war pensioners in regards to augmentations, there exists one category that *must* be an object of special solicitude on the part

23. *Journal des veuves de guerre* no. 23 (October 1926), no pagination.

24. These revaluations were negligible in scope for all war victims, but particularly so for widows, who gained less than a hundred francs a year. Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants*. 2., Table 25,

25. *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*, 1er trimestre 1928, 9.

of the Deputies and Senators...” She insisted that this was only fair since war widows had been made to shoulder an excessively large share of the burden that fell to all the victims of the war.²⁶

The Federation of War Widows experienced a similar mood swing over the course of 1928. During the winter, the main topic of discussion in the *Journal* was the recent budget, which was described as a “humiliating defeat” and was the cause of outrage among war widows. Many of the letters published by the periodical expressed bitterness and disappointment that occasionally verged on extremism:

Once again, injustice has been consecrated. I shed tears of indignation tonight...We apparently count for very little for those who claim to be our defenders, and our efforts are therefore all in vain! What are we to do? How can we attract public attention to our moral and material suffering? Will we have to resort to extreme measures and imitate that poor widow in Toulon—the widow of an officer killed in the war—and each go to our local town hall and try to stab our mayor so that someone finally shows some interest in us?²⁷

The themes taken up in other letters were familiar ones, from the indifference of a French public that preferred to ignore the plight of war victims to the less-than-faithful support that veterans’ associations lent to the cause of war widows, apparently preferring to put their own demands ahead of those of their female comrades.²⁸

In spite of the bitterness unleashed by this setback, the Federation’s tone became much more upbeat only a few months later, and hopes were raised that surely the *next* budget would bring an end to the injustices faced by war widows. The Minister of Pension had made some favourable remarks during the summer of 1928 that led the organization to believe that reparation would soon be obtained “after long years of patient efforts and painful waiting.” In fact, the bitter disappointment of the past year was soon forgotten, and rosy-eyed optimism had

26. Ibid., 4e trimestre 1928, 14, 17.

27. *Journal des veuves de guerre*, no. 38 (January 1928), no pagination.

28. The organization’s disappointment with veterans’ groups was particularly keen on this occasion. During a giant congress that had gathered most veterans’ and war victims’ associations at Versailles the preceding November, it had seemed that the demands of war widows were widely supported. These “Estates General” had issued a declaration that had been unanimously approved and which appeared unequivocal and precise, “giving priority and a formal character to the principal of bringing war widows’ pensions in line with those of veterans with a 50% invalidity rate.” Because of this overwhelming show of support, war widows had felt certain that victory was at hand, and their disappointment was all the greater when the 1928 budget failed to give them satisfaction. The Federation’s leaders were of the opinion that the declaration at Versailles clearly meant that any government funds for war victims should have been used first and foremost to satisfy the demands of widows. With false naivete, Federation leaders asked their male “comrades” whether they had failed to understand what had been said at Versailles, or whether the declaration had simply been intended to silence the boisterous women as a parent humours a small child. Ibid., no. 40 (March 1928), no pagination.

become the order of the day.²⁹

In spite of the success of 1929,³⁰ it is uncertain how much effect the advocacy of war widows' associations actually had. Politicians seemed to pay little heed to these organizations, perhaps because of their small memberships comprised of individuals who could not even vote. War widows presented a united front, even when it came to certain associations whose political and religious beliefs could make cooperation problematic, but French politicians did not regard them with the same trepidation as their male counterparts.

The Catholic Union of War Widows

In the previous chapter, we saw that religious charities played an important role in succouring war widows. Such aid was a natural outgrowth of Christian philanthropic activity in general, but the existence of religious widows' associations is more surprising. These organizations demonstrate that religion was still an important force in postwar France, one that made its presence felt in many different spheres. Religious widows' associations also reveal how complex the transition from charity to welfare was: a lengthy process rather than a sudden change, it left much room for traditional social forces to act as mediators and intermediaries.³¹

While most of the war widows' associations created in interwar France were secular in nature, a few were overtly religious, none more so than the Catholic Union of War Widows, a national organization based in Lyon. The Union was pervaded with a Christian mysticism that was becoming increasingly rare in Third Republic France, but religious and political extremism did not prevent its leaders from cooperating with other associations or worrying about the material needs of members. As for the image of the pious Christian war widow so cherished by the Union and its affiliates, this was only a more extreme version of the stereotype that was often used and abused by secular associations.

The background of the Union's humble membership base (only four hundred members had subscribed to its *Bulletin* in 1925) is uncertain. One of the benefits of membership was

29. *Ibid.*, no. 45 (August 1928), no pagination. Likewise, the Association's tone towards veterans' associations quickly changed, perhaps out of necessity.

30. The government not only pegged the rates for widows' pensions to those of veterans with a 50% disability rate, but also increased their pension by several hundred francs, the second-most important improvement in the interwar period after that of 1925.

31. Again, the importance of religious war widows' associations, like Christian charities, must be seen in the context of a Christianity that had become "feminized" over the course of the nineteenth century. As Frenchmen turned away from the Church, their wives and daughters flocked to it as one of the only institutions that catered to them and offered them meaningful roles and a sociable climate. Roger Magraw, *France 1800-1914: A Social History* (London: Longman, 2002), 170, 173.

special discounts at participating stores, most of which were fairly up-scale: the *Bon Marché*, *Robert* (a perfume shop) and *Le Nain Bleu* (a toy store). This suggests that the union was intended mainly for relatively well-off women, but much of the advice that was included in official publications was obviously for women on a tight budget. Furthermore, the Catholic Union had many of the permanent services typical of charities (see Chapter 3), including a secretariat, clothing section, and summer camps for orphans, all of which were for the benefit of members.³²

The leaders of the Catholic Union, unlike most of their counterparts, had no qualms about expressing their political and religious views, and the organization constantly displayed a striking brand of religious fanaticism. The Union repeatedly invoked the themes of great, heart-rending sorrow and the sacred memory of a heroically deceased husband:

You can still remember the terrible sense of emptiness that overwhelmed you when the fatal news entered your home through that same doorway where each letter that arrived brought you so much joy... You stood, stunned, dizzy, alone and uncomfortable... Instinctively, you sought out other women like yourselves... you recognized in each other the trials, the hopes and the unshakeable will to continue the sublime task of those for whom you weep.³³

There was nothing unusual about such sentimental but heartfelt wishes, which could be found in the publication of all war widows' associations. However, the Union constantly revealed its religiosity in a variety of way: a favourite tactic was recounting the story of a pious war widow who found God thanks to the Union. During one of the organisation's regular recreational sessions, a young widow watched a play put on by a group of orphans and was completely drawn into this world of fantasy in which she saw her own trials and tribulations, particularly her worries as a mother, reflected in the main character. She was so mesmerized that she believed herself to be lost in a beautiful dream when the Virgin Mary appeared on stage to ease the sufferings of the heroine. As the widow explained, "if the large crowd that surrounded me had not called me back to reality, I would have thrown myself on my knees before our Holy Mother." After that fateful day, she "returned to her work with enthusiasm and a light heart, her tiny room brightened by all the divine messengers that surround her."³⁴

The Union's political agenda was equally clear and unambiguous, with leaders quite willing to ask members to pray for "good" municipal elections, which presumably meant one

32. *Bulletin de l'union catholique des veuves de la Guerre*, January-February 1929, 10.

33. *Ibid.*, Mars-Avril 1925, 1. In general, the *Bulletin* was filled with religious pablum that had little to do with widowhood, such as the full text of the papal encyclical on Christian education for youth, hagiographies of Thomas à Kempis, etc.

34. *Ibid.*, 7.

where as few godless Socialists as possible were elected. The Union urged widows not to be discouraged by the 1924 victory of the *Cartel de la gauche*, and reminded them that sometimes a defeat can teach a valuable lesson: after all, it had been just such a setback (presumably a reference to the 1904 separation of Church and State) that had united French Catholics.³⁵ On another occasion, an apparently harmless prayer for the scholarly success of children turned into a dire warning regarding secular, state-run schools:

Alas! What sorrow is in store for us, if we accept to have our children brought up in schools where God is not permitted to enter!...Christian mothers, baptized mothers, who are alone to raise your children, do not put your children in schools where the name of our almighty Father is never pronounced, where the Cross is shunned. Do you think that your husband who has seen God, who has been judged by Him, and who now dwells in Eternity, would approve of you doing such a thing?³⁶

One suspects that this was a rhetorical question. The majority of secular widows' associations claimed to be completely apolitical and were careful to explain that although they frequently found themselves having disagreements with government representatives, this did not reflect animosity towards the party or parties in power at the moment.³⁷ The Catholic Union clearly had no such qualms.

In spite of its fanaticism, the Catholic Union was always concerned with more pragmatic matters that might be of interest to widows and passed on useful information and advice whenever possible. For example, association leaders encouraged members to take advantage of a tool that widows ignored too often or simply saw as an instrument of punishment used against them: the law. The editors of the *Bulletin* took it upon themselves to make readers aware of a variety of legislative measures that could be useful to them. Of course, such laws "were centred on what is our predestined niche, the home," and it was in this spirit that the editors reminded widows of the law of 12 April 1906 on affordable housing, which was intended for people of limited means.³⁸ The Union also made sure to highlight the law of 13 July 1925 (modifying that of 22 July 1923, the "Law of National Encouragement") which, with clear natalist overtones, provided mothers with 120 francs per year for each of her children after the first who were under

35. *Ibid.*, 6.

36. *Bulletin de l'union catholique des veuves de la guerre*, September-October 1925, no pagination.

37. See for example *Bulletin périodique de l'Association départementale des veuves de guerre de la Charente-Inférieure*, no. 1, (June 1925), 1-2

38. *Bulletin de l'union catholique des veuves de la guerre*, July-August 1928, no pagination. The editors considered it necessary but unnatural for women to have to worry about such things: "Never will we be able to sufficiently emphasize the fact that our situations as heads of family imposes upon us the obligation to extend our sphere of knowledge and our actions beyond the boundaries that the presence of our husband would naturally have set for us."

fourteen years of age.³⁹ The Union reminded widows that pensions were not subject to income tax,⁴⁰ and notified them of the social insurance law of 1 April 1928 which automatically insured women (and men) whose total yearly income was less than 15,000 francs.⁴¹ In addition to these published reminders, the Union encouraged members to visit their local office, where they were promised a warm welcome and useful advice on subjects that were of particular interest to them, from their children's education to the ins and outs of applying for pensions.⁴² Given the complexity of all these laws, the importance of such information and advice should not be underestimated; clearly, the Catholic Union's leaders did much more than spout religious dogma. They even realized that helping good Christian war widows could require uneasy alliances.

The Catholic Union of War Widows therefore did not remain aloof from the world of veterans' and war victims' associations, in spite of certain of its ideological positions which were not always in keeping with the general political consensus of the time. In 1927, the Union took part in the "Estates General" of war victims' associations at Versailles (see page 161, note 28). The congress, which included a study commission on war widows, ended with the formation of a new loose-knit national federation, the *Confédération nationale de la France meurtrie*. The Catholic Union expressed the hope that such a large body, representing so many different organizations, would be able to affect the decisions of future governments regarding war widows' pensions.⁴³

Such a sentiment suggests that the Union was not as isolationist as its religious extremism might suggest, and it was in fact around this time that it began to participate more fully in associational life. In February 1928, the Union finally managed to be represented on the departmental *Comité des mutilés et réformés* (the local sub-section of the *Office national des mutilés*), an arrangement that was supposedly quite advantageous for the organization. A month later, five members of the Union were admitted to the administrative council of the departmental office of the Wards of the Nation, while many other members of the organization also sat on the cantonal sections of the ONPN. Two members of the Union also belonged to the action committee of the regional Association of War Victims and Veterans (*Association de victimes de la guerre et anciens combattants*), another advocacy group that lobbied for pension increases.

39. Ibid., May-June 1926, 7-8.

40. Ibid., January-February 1927, 8.

41. Ibid., January-February 1929, no pagination.

42. Ibid., March-April 1928, no pagination.

43. Ibid., January-February 1928, 2-4.

The Union enjoyed excellent relations with *Souvenir français*, a charity that saw to the upkeep of military tombs, and also had a close partnership with the D.R.A.C., an association that had been created for the defence of religiously-minded veterans. Finally, the organization also had a very good rapport with the Disabled Officers' Association (*Association des officiers mutilés*), which offered assistance to the widows of career army officers. The Union, despite its barely concealed contempt for the ungodly society of interwar France, therefore ultimately believed that it was "only by working together in such a fashion that we can hope to obtain more equitable treatment for war widows."⁴⁴ In 1930, when the Union reminded its members of the benefits that war widows had obtained during the previous year, (including widows' pensions being made equivalent to half of that allocated to a completely disabled veteran) it insisted that these changes had come about as a result of public opinion which the Union helped to represent. This statement clearly implied that continued collaboration with other associations was necessary in order to influence politicians.⁴⁵

As the economic situation in France deteriorated during the 1930s and war pensions were threatened, the Union cooperated with other organizations to put pressure on the government. In May 1933, the so-called "Cartel of War Victims of the Rhône" brought together the presidents of various associations of veterans and war widows to hammer out a collective policy in regards to the rumours of budget projects on the part of the state that threatened to affect war victims. Meanwhile, the *Confédération nationale de la France meurtrie* (see above) was energetically protesting the insufficient credits that had been allocated to the departmental offices of the Wards of the Nation.⁴⁶

While willing to cooperate with various other organizations when it came to defending the rights and interests of war widows, the Union did not tone down its sentimental religiosity when discussing the plight of war widows during the early 1930s:

Tonight, my thoughts turn to the most miserable of women, the solitary widow, sitting alone by a fire that is slowly dying. At this instant, life seems like little more than a heavy burden. The past is nothing but sorrow, the future nothing but fear and worry...her suffering, secret and hidden to the world, becomes a prayer, the prayer of a widow that only God can hear. It is to this most miserable of women that I listen tonight...she who has given everything, who has lost everything and now finds herself without a future, defenceless, on the cusp of old age...Is there a single person, anywhere on this earth, who thinks about her?⁴⁷

44. Ibid., March-April 1928, 2-5.

45. Ibid., January-February 1930, 5-6, 8.

46. Ibid., June 1933, no pagination.

47. Ibid., March 1933, no pagination.

Despite the typical sentimentality and mawkishness, the Union was making an important point about the challenges that faced war widows as they grew older and their children left home, an issue that was addressed by other associations during the 1930s.

It is easy to mock the religious rhetoric of the Catholic Union, but the fact is that its rhetoric was not all that different from what one commonly heard in secular society, where the “fallen heroes” of the Great War had attained a quasi-religious status of their own (see page 11) and war widows were portrayed as eternally faithful wives in mourning. At any rate, such beliefs did not prevent religious widows’ organizations⁴⁸ from supporting many initiatives common to the associational movement as a whole, including those centred around suffrage.

The Associations, Feminism and Suffrage

As previously mentioned, pension readjustments were slow in coming and failed to keep up with the falling value of the franc. Embittered and frustrated by the government’s apparent disregard for their plight, widows’ associations blamed their difficulties in part on the civil status of women, and were ardent supporters of women’s suffrage. Much like Hubertine Auclert and Madeleine Pelletier, two of the foremost French feminists of the Third Republic, they came to believe that as long as women could not vote, they would be unable to obtain anything from politicians, for whom the only thing that mattered was the opinion of the electorate.⁴⁹ Historian Gisela Bock has argued that emergent European welfare states discriminated against women from the very beginning since the right to support depended on one’s status as a *citizen*, something that most women did not enjoy.⁵⁰ War widows’ associations were well aware of this handicap.

Association leaders became increasingly frustrated at the government’s perceived slights towards war widows during the 1920s. In 1926, Parliament voted in favour of a new civic tax, and the law included a provision to exempt disabled veterans whose invalidity rate was 50% or

48. Many local organizations were affiliated with the Catholic Union, including the South-Eastern Catholic Union of War Widows, which was in turn composed of local committees, including one in Tarare, a small town near Lyon. The tone of this tiny organization was similar to that of its national counterpart, and its leaders were even more filled with religious zeal. Reflecting on the first ten years’ of the Union’s existence, these leaders exulted: “What graces we have received! What marks of favour from Our Lord...who, it is true, allowed us to be tried and tested, but only in order to comfort and console us and to show that He is really our Father. If He allows us to suffer, it is only to test our love.” One wonders whether the rank and file (ninety-eight widows and 134 orphans in 1926) was quite so grateful for the particular fashion in which the Heavenly Father had chosen to demonstrate his love. *Bulletin de l’union catholique des veuves de la guerre du Sud-Est, comité de Tarare* (1926), 1-3.

49. James H. McMillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914*, 210.

50. Gisela Bock, “Poverty and Mothers’ Rights in the Emerging Welfare States,” 402.

more (to whom widows were theoretically assimilated). The leaders of the Corrèze Association were extremely unhappy that war widows were to be taxed:

Alas! If we had any illusions about the “eternal gratitude” that we were owed by the nation or about the “loving protection” that would be extended to us, they are now well and truly dead. The reality is this: life becomes harder and more painful every day for the widows and children of the dead. You see, the problem is that these men no longer have voices and cannot do anything to defend those they left behind... We have all the responsibilities of the heads of families, but we do not have the rights that should come with them. Ah! If we were electors, what fine speeches would be made in our honour... you can be certain that we would also have been spared this odious tax!... But the fact is that we will have to wait until our sons are old enough to vote before we can have justice.⁵¹

This was the first time that one of the Corrèze Association’s leaders made explicit the perceived link between the right to vote and favourable treatment from politicians when it came to war pensions. The theme would become a familiar one over the next few years as pension adjustments for war widows were slow in coming, often lagged behind the revaluation accorded to disabled veterans, and failed to keep pace with the rising cost of living.⁵²

The Charente Association’s pro-suffrage stance, like that of its counterpart in Corrèze, became increasingly apparent as the years went by. The Association was particularly bitter about the 1926 tax and assured its members that such a thing would never have come about if war widows were represented in the Chamber. Association leaders even issued a call for action: “If you were not feminists yesterday, my dear comrades, you will be tomorrow, and you will ask for the ballot, because ultimately that is the only thing that really matters...”⁵³

The call for suffrage was repeated again and again during the late 1920s and early 1930s as war widows increasingly came to feel that the unequal way in which the government adjusted pensions for different groups reflected the amount of power that each wielded. The leaders of the Corrèze Association considered this profoundly unjust:

51. *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*, 2e trimestre 1926, 14-15.

52. Outrage over pension adjustments and the need for women to vote to protect their own interests was not the exclusive province of war widows, as an acerbic article by one Henri Pichot, president of a large association for disabled veterans, attests:

Let’s look at the numbers, shall we?... The law of 1831 would have provided you, as a war widow, with 563 francs a year... after the adjustments in 1928, you’re getting 1,696 “new” francs, which means 285 gold francs. Wonder of wonders! Your pension is half what your great grandmother living under the Empire or the ultra royalist Restoration regime would have gotten. Now that’s gratitude!

Pichot concluded that the only way that widows would be able to protect their interests in cases like these was if they had the right to vote. *Ibid.*, 2e trimestre 1928, 23-25.

53. *Bulletin périodique de l'Association départementale des veuves de guerre de la Charente-Inférieure*, no. 4 (no date), 3-4.

To defend the nation, over a million Frenchmen died, leaving behind thousands of women. These women remained alone to raise their children, struggling amidst the difficulties of the after-war period. They have known all the worries and assumed all the responsibilities of heads of families. Tax-payers without privilege, they have to bear like everyone else the crushing burden of taxes. And yet, they are nothing in the Nation...⁵⁴

Not all widows' associations were completely in favour of women's suffrage, however. The Federation of War Widows' conservatism and unorthodox approach to problems facing war widows could be seen in its ambivalence regarding the right to vote. The Federation, like its counterparts, repeatedly asserted that politicians quite simply considered war widows to be unimportant because they, as women, did not have the right to vote. The Federation insisted that in order to protect their rights and those of their children, war widows needed the ballot, and this argument was bolstered with the usual rhetoric about how such women were heads of families but could not fulfill their obligations adequately as long as they remained disenfranchised. However, the Federation's *Journal* also contained articles that were less favourable to the idea of women being allowed to vote. In such cases, the writers admitted that women suffered cruelly from various forms of inequality and that "real, genuine feminism" was concerned first and foremost with righting such wrongs and making sure that "young, defenceless girls" were no longer shamefully exploited for a mere pittance by cruel industrialists and in the process exposed to the "worst perversions."⁵⁵ Basing themselves on such Dickensian fantasies, the organization's leaders were sympathetic with the need for women to be able to defend their interests and protect themselves when bereft of a male guardian. The Federation's unspoken concern was that it was difficult to completely separate such laudable goals from the machinations of "bad" feminists.

Even the ultra-conservative Catholic Union was interested in feminism and the struggle for suffrage, at least insofar as this was approved by Mother Church.⁵⁶ In this respect, its rhetoric sounded like that of its secular counterparts: "The loss which causes us such sorrow on a daily basis has thrust us into the roles of heads of families, with all the duties and responsibilities that this entails, and we therefore do not fear the acquisition of new rights: we look forward to the right to vote without fear." But the Union qualified this remark by stating that widows, and in

54. *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*, 1er trimestre 1929.

55. *Journal des veuves de guerre*, no. 6 (May 1925), no pagination.

56. Despite its basically reactionary nature, the Union could sometimes appear progressive, fighting for the rights of mothers over their children to be made equal to those of the father and demanding the creation of part-time work and social organization that takes into account her duties in the home. *Bulletin de l'union catholique des veuves de la guerre*, January-February 1930, 5-6, 8.

particular war widows, matured beyond their years because of the challenges they faced and would therefore be able to use such a right with due gravity. The implication was that single or married women might not be equal to the task, and it is unclear whether Union leaders were truly in favour of complete female suffrage or whether they would have preferred that only war widows have the right in lieu of their husbands.⁵⁷

However, by 1930 the Union's support of female suffrage, although still rooted in a classical brand of difference feminism mixed with Christian fundamentalism, was clearly no longer restricted to war widows.⁵⁸ In the summer of 1930, when a law to give women the vote was being discussed in Parliament, Union leaders confidently asserted that it was almost certain that war widows would soon have the franchise. In fact, the Union was so confident of this that it did not even bother to lend its support to the efforts, believing that this would have been akin to "smashing in an open door." The law under consideration concerned only war widows, but the Union rejoiced in part because this was probably the first step towards universal female suffrage.⁵⁹ The Union's publication made no further mention of this initiative, which of course came to nought as did other attempts to give women the vote in interwar France.⁶⁰

Although the associations' efforts in this domain did not have any immediate effect, their unity of purpose was striking. The fact that this collective effort yielded no result must have been extremely disheartening and led many war widows to wonder whether association

57. Ibid., March-April, 1928, 5.

58. Conservative French Catholics were not necessarily opposed to female suffrage. Prior to the war, Marie Maugeret and her Catholic feminist group actively promoted the idea and even managed to win the support of a certain number of clergy and laymen. This support was based on the assumption that a ballot in a woman's hand was a conservative force that would help to defend traditional notions of marriage and society. Likewise, the Catholic *Ligue Patriotique des Femmes*, founded in 1914, had become a proponent of women's suffrage by the end of the Great War. James. H. McMillan, *France and Women*, 204; Idem., "Religion and Gender in Modern France: Some Reflections," in *Religion, Society and Politics in France Since 1789*, ed. Frank Tallett and Nicholas Atkin (London: The Hambledon Press, 1991), 64-65.

59. *Bulletin de l'Union catholique des veuves de la guerre*, July-August 1930, no pagination.

60. A bill that would have allowed women to vote in municipal elections had been tabled in 1918 and later expanded to give women full legislative equality. Surprisingly, this bill was approved by a large majority in the Chamber of Deputies, 329 votes to 95. The majority of those opposed to the law were center-left Radicals, as were the leading figures in the ensuing special committees who lobbied against the bill and ensured that it did not receive the approval of the Senate. Shaped by the struggle between Church and State that had led to Separation, Radicals believed that giving women the vote would have been the equivalent of handing political power over to the priests who educated them. Further attempts by the Chamber during the 1920s and 1930s proved no more successful, leaving war widows' associations particularly disgruntled on that front. Paul Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic: Women's Political and Civil Rights in France, 1918-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 105-106. It is worth noting that the issue of women's vote was put back on the table by Maurice Barrès, who had proposed the introduction of the "suffrage of the dead" in 1916, a system whereby war widows would be "given" the votes of their dead husbands.

leaders had been right to claim that there was strength in numbers. Unable to influence politicians directly through the vote, war widows still needed someone to speak up for them, and the associations had much to do during the 1930s.

The Associations in the 1930s: Old Age, Work Conditions, Unemployment and Pacifism

Although the Great Depression did not have as catastrophic an impact on France as on other countries, the economy nonetheless entered a period of prolonged difficulty. Not all sectors were affected equally, but the overall result was a drastic slowdown, with exports decreasing by 60% between 1929 and 1935. Although unemployment statistics for the period were unreliable and disguised the severity of the problem, it is certain that by 1935 over half a million people were without work. The situation was particularly grim for working women, three hundred thousand of whom were fired between 1931 and 1936 in order to return to their “natural” occupations as mothers and homemakers.⁶¹ It was against this backdrop that widows’ associations continued to operate during the 1930s, and it is no surprise that their concerns often revolved around employment.

Even during the 1920s, the associations had been aware of how precarious widows’ employment could be:⁶² life had already been difficult for such women at that time despite a relatively healthy economy. While the departure of children from the home may have eased their burden somewhat during the following decade, their advancing age and the economic situation created new problems. The Corrèze and Charente Associations, the Catholic Union and the Federation of War Widows all addressed these issues, devoting more attention than before to the hardships that widows faced in the workplace and their inability to find employment. Perhaps thanks to an international situation that was as grim as the national economy, these organizations also began to speak openly about pacifism, a cause understandably close to the heart of most war widows.

The Federal Union and its local affiliates remained active as a new decade dawned. Widow Vacher, still president of the Corrèze Association, was aware that this fact needed to be explained: “certain members may be wearily asking themselves why all this new activity is necessary; they may feel that they have accomplished their duty because they have seen their

61. Dominique Borne and Henri Dubief, *La crise des années 30*, 27-28, 36-37.

62. The president of the *Française*, an association for North African widows, had intervened personally when, in the fall of 1920, war widows working for the local telephone service became worried when they heard about an upcoming wave of dismissals. *Bulletin mensuel des veuves et orphelins de la Grande Guerre*, no. 2 (November-December 1920), 3.

children reach adulthood and establish themselves.” However, she insisted that there remained a great deal to be done, and that many material concerns had to be addressed, especially when it came to old or infirm widows, as well as those without families to support them and who could never hope to survive with their pensions alone. Vacher therefore urged all members to remain involved in the association and lend their support to all these worthy causes.⁶³ The need for continued vigilance was suggested a year later when several widows informed the Association that they were having a great deal of difficulty acquiring a copy of their husbands’ death notices bearing the mention: “Died for his country” from their local City Hall. According to the *Bulletin*, there was no doubt whatsoever that the women who were making these requests had the right to receive the aforementioned document.⁶⁴

Although the old battle over pensions also continued as the new decade began,⁶⁵ unemployment was now the largest single worry of many war widows. By 1933 the Federal Union had come to deplore the fact that female “comrades” were being hit very hard by the economic crisis. The Union’s leaders believed that war widows should be the last people fired by private companies and the government, but realized that these women “whose hair is graying and whose faces are marked with their cares and worries just don’t have the vivacity and spirit that those in charge of offices and workshops like so much.” As a result, many a widow who had managed to create a little situation for herself was suddenly fired and often could not find another job. As if this was not bad enough, merciless tax collectors frequently added to this woman’s misery. The Union was particularly outraged by the case of a war widow in Paris who, having neglected to answer a government notification warning her that she owed the ridiculous sum of two francs and twenty-three centimes in back taxes, arrived home one evening to find her door padlocked and her furnishings seized by the tax office. Other widows had their pensions frozen to pay back the cost of hospital stays, which the Union felt demonstrated a stunning heartlessness on the state’s part and gave the impression that “war widows as pensioners are considered to be people living in great comfort who could pay expensive hospital bills without

63. *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*, 3rd and 4th trimesters 1930, 3.

64. *Ibid.*, 1er trimestre 1931, 20.

65. Towards the end of 1930, the government’s Pensions Commission proposed to increase the pensions of war widows who remarried and became widowed a second time, but the Finance Commission eventually scuppered the plan. The president of the Corrèze association was very disappointed by this development, believing that the increase would at least have represented a first step and a moral victory for the Federal Union. The Union’s goal was to ensure that a war widow who lost her second husband would regain her full pension, which was not currently the case: she continued to receive a remarried widow’s pension, still frozen at the 1925 rate of eight hundred francs. *Ibid.*, 8.

any undue difficulty if they ever needed an operation.”⁶⁶

The president of the Corrèze Association received more grim news concerning the fate of working widows when she spoke to a Mrs. Cassou, president of the Parisian Union of War Widows and general secretary of the Federal Union of Veterans and War Victims. Mrs. Cassou reminded her interlocutor that a woman who had children to take care of could not possibly survive with only her pension, and therefore had to find work. The problem that such a woman now faced was unemployment, as the grim economic situation was forcing employers to cut back personnel. Cassou believed that in spite of the protection that employed war widows were supposed to benefit from, they were in fact being dismissed at an alarming rate: “They have reached a certain age. Their bosses fire them in order to hire younger women! There are so many young people waiting!” According to this senior figure in the associational world, the problem of war widows’ employment was not simply a case of selfish employers wanting to get rid of aging women in favour of younger, prettier and perkier ones: in a climate of economic crisis, there were simply too many people looking for too few jobs and war widows were disadvantaged because of the belief that they at least had their pensions to fall back on. The reality, however, was that these women found themselves in a very difficult position, especially when the crisis meant that their adult children were often themselves incapable of finding jobs; far from being able to help their mothers, these individuals were often in need of assistance themselves.⁶⁷

Even war widows who had jobs and were able to hold on to them could be facing a grim existence thanks to the nature of the employment available to them. In 1930, the Federation of War Widows’ little journal published extensive extracts from an investigative piece written by a Ms. Henriette Brunette that had recently appeared in the popular Parisian newspaper *Le Quotidien*. Brunette’s article was a grim exposé of women’s work, and the editors of the *Journal* drew their readers’ attention to the particularly striking passages regarding home or piece work, suggesting that many war widows were dependent on this type of employment.

66. Ibid., 1er trimestre 1932, 18-19.

67. Ibid., 3e et 4e trimestres 1934, 10-12. Cases of women who had to support dependent older children were not uncommon among “civilian” widows, as the 1906 investigation of homeworkers suggests. Mrs. O. was a fifty-year-old widow who was burdened with a twenty-year-old daughter who suffered from tuberculosis and could do absolutely nothing. She also lived with her son, who was trained as a printer, but who was currently forced to earn a living doing various odd jobs and only contributed two francs per day. The widow explained to the investigators that “When [my husband] died and the children were still young, my life was incredibly hard, but I kept my hopes up, telling myself that when they grew and had jobs, things would be much better. But in fact, they are now worse, and there is nothing left to hope for.” Direction du Travail, *Enquête sur le travail à domicile dans l’industrie de la lingerie. Tome I: Paris*, 723-724.

Brunette argued that despite the irregular hours involved in such work, the days were no shorter than they were in the factory or the workshop; in fact, piece work was in general so poorly remunerated that it was necessary to work harder and longer than in workshops to earn a comparable salary. Brunette claimed to have met home workers who received a measly eighty centimes from a clothing firm for each dress that was sewn. No matter how simple the dress may have been, the preparation and sewing involved required a certain minimum of work and exertion that would have been more richly rewarded in many other professions: after all, “what is eighty centimes worth today?”⁶⁸

Brunette concluded that, sadly, it was obvious that the worst-paying jobs for women were essentially foisted upon them by men, who always had the chance to earn a better living regardless of whether or not they were supporting a family. Because of this, a sewer or knitter earned the trifling sum of two francs an hour for labour that required great care and attention while slowly destroying one’s eyesight. Brunette urged such a woman to give up the needle, “so dear to the poets,” and to venture into factories despite the fact that so many men were horrified at the thought of women working in such environments. The fact was that there she could earn 3.2 to 4 francs an hour as a winder; 3.28 to 4.35 francs an hour as a tin plate worker; 3 francs an hour as a lathe operator; or 4 francs an hour as a silverware polisher. Ultimately, however, Brunette concluded that there was little chance of women entering the factory *en masse* any time soon since the deck was stacked against them:

Everywhere that women’s work is considered to be something fundamentally different from men’s work, in the fashion workshop where no man would set foot, in the offices where women are (just barely) tolerated, the rate at which society currently rewards their effort does not allow them to attain the bare minimum of security and ease that would seem to be just compensation for their labour.⁶⁹

Such a conclusion is strikingly reminiscent of recent scholarship that has emphasized the extent to which the only work available to women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was low-paying because it was by definition “unskilled” (see page 13).⁷⁰

In light of this powerful condemnation of piece work, an article appearing in the *Journal*

68. *Le Journal des Veuves et des Orphelins* no. 60 (November 1930), no pagination.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Mary Lynn Stewart has convincingly argued that various labour laws passed by the Third Republic in order to “protect” a select few women working in industry were actually designed to reinforce the “ghettoization” of these women in low-paying jobs. This had the advantage of providing employers with a pool of cheap labor and of reassuring working men that their own (allegedly “skilled”) jobs were safe from female competition. Mary Lynn Stewart, *Women, Work and the French State: Labour, Protection, and Social Patriarchy* (Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989).

three years later, more or less praising the virtues of the same sort of home work, is somewhat puzzling. Little more than a thinly disguised advertisement, the short piece praised the virtues of a recently-published book that provided the addresses of over four thousand fashion houses in Paris and in the provinces that offered home work. Such an arrangement, the reader was informed, was perfect for all those who were trying to increase their insufficient revenues during this “difficult period,” something that definitely applied to most war widows. The article provided a ridiculously light-hearted and upbeat description of the easy work that “people” (surely “women”) could do to “supplement their income” or “tide themselves over for a bit,” all of which was a far cry from the grim necessity that would normally drive women to such employment.⁷¹ This tasteless advertisement was strangely out of character for the *Journal*: did the editors feel that the economic climate was so bad that such difficult, poorly-remunerated work might actually be welcomed by certain war widows whose situation was becoming desperate?

By the end of the decade, widows' associations were also starting to pay attention to the fate of such women after their children left home. The Federation of War Widows made its point in a typically melodramatic fashion:

Now that the children have become adults and left the nest, most [widows] can provide for themselves without too much difficulty; her task now seems less arduous; she will finally be able to live a little for herself! But no! An implacable destiny foils her plans: exhausted by sorrow, worn down by hard work inside and outside the home, the widow is now nothing but a human wreckage on which sickness and poverty will soon pounce. Unable to work, what will become of her?...Will the widow of the Hero who is so glorified have to enter a hospice for the elderly before her time?⁷²

The writer's solution was to increase war widows' pensions once they reached a certain age such as fifty-five. Such a scheme was nothing short of utopian, since it had recently proved so difficult to obtain a mediocre cost-of-living increase for all war widows.

Nevertheless, the organization was still advocating this idea three years later after having received numerous letters from older widows describing the hardships they faced. A typical case was that of a middle-aged woman who, despite not being burdened with children, was eventually obliged to seek work to supplement her pension. Since this was no simple task in that period of unemployment, she decided to apply for jobs that the government had reserved for war victims. After having spent weeks writing competitive examinations and undergoing medical examinations, she was curtly informed that, at fifty-five, she was simply too old for any

71. *Le Journal des Veuves et des Orphelins*, no. 99 (February 1933), no pagination.

72. *Ibid.*, no. 63 (February 1930), no pagination.

of the positions that were available. She was therefore forced to rely on piece work which earned her next to nothing. The Federation concluded that such cases demonstrated the need to increase the pensions of war widows who had reached the same age, a need that amounted to “a vital social measure.”⁷³

Certain widows’ associations also began to express their pacifist tendencies openly during the 1930s, which was very much in keeping with the spirit of the times. The pacifist movement in interwar France was as vibrant as those in Britain or Germany, and women played an important role in it, thanks largely to their participation in the French section of the *Ligue Internationale des femmes pour la paix et la liberté* (LIFPL), an organization that had been founded at the Hague in 1915 even as the Great War was raging. The French section of the LIFPL only had five hundred or so members during the 1920s, much less than its counterparts across the Rhine or the Channel. For the women of the LIFPL, who advocated an integral pacifism that was not yet popular among male pacifists, it seemed obvious that pacifism and feminism were closely linked. This “natural” connection depended heavily on the evocation of motherhood and the image of women as bearers and preservers of life. According to Norman Ingram, the LIFPL’s calls for action became more urgent during the 1930s, as fascism spread across Europe and the spectre of war reappeared.⁷⁴ Coincidentally or not, this was the same period that saw widows’ associations shed their inhibitions and talk openly about pacifism.

During the 1920s, the Corrèze Association, like many such organizations, had kept its focus exclusively on issues that were of immediate interest to widows, orphans and ascendants. That association obviously tried to steer clear of broader political and social issues that might divide a diverse readership whose only common trait was the loss of a husband and the subsequent government pension. However, the Association was also following a trend in the early 1930s when it came out firmly in favour of pacifism. The organization’s leaders even had a fairly concrete plan of action:

...[T]he imperious duty of veterans, of widows, of all the victims who know what war is like, is to enroll as many young people as possible in a great crusade for peace. Each group of our association must become a veritable headquarters of pacifist propaganda, and must mold the children that will soon be taking our places by making them participate in peace demonstrations, by bringing them along on pilgrimages to the

73. *Ibid.*, no. 103 (August-September 1933), no pagination.

74. Norman Ingram, *The Politics of Dissent: Pacifism in France 1919-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 3, 250-253, 302. Women in France and Europe had started to join the peace movement *en masse* during the 1890s, and this development was closely linked to feminism and the demand for female suffrage. Sandi E. Cooper, *Patriotic Pacifism: Waging War on War in Europe, 1815-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 62-63.

battlefield, by providing them with scholarships that will permit them to travel abroad, and most of all by setting up summer camps where our influence on them will be particularly great and where they will have the opportunity to meet children of all nationalities.

The writer claimed that war widows were too scarred by the war years and the ensuing suffering to contemplate the horrible possibility that their sons might have to be sacrificed as their fathers had been before, and apparently in vain.⁷⁵ This theme was echoed in other war widows' publications, and certain of the more pacifist associations put a great deal of pressure on the government to spare their children from military service.⁷⁶

From that point on, it was not uncommon to find pacifist sentiments openly expressed in the pages of the *Bulletin*. In 1933, the publication revealed that Mme. Vacher, the long-time president of the Association, had created a pacifist organization that she hoped would unite all the women in the department. The new organization, dubbed the International League of Mothers and Female Educators for Peace, claimed, as was common for such groups, to be above party and religious affiliations in order to cast as wide a net as possible when it came to recruiting members. The League, whose motto was "Towards Peace, Through Love" was typical of pacifist organizations that emphasized women's non-violent natures: "Is it not the natural task of women to guide the world towards concord and sweetness, to raise children so that they live and respect the lives of others?"⁷⁷

Despite its orthodox Catholicism, the Catholic Union's attitude towards war long remained unclear. This ambiguity was easy to sustain during the 1920s, when it was still possible to believe that the Great War had really been the "der des 'der" and that Europe could look forward to generations of peace. The more uncertain international climate of the 1930s and the looming shadow of war made it much more difficult for the Union to play coy, and it broke its silence on this subject in 1936:

It is clearly up to us as war widows to take up the initiative of a crusade against war. Let us transform our mourning veils into shields and use them in the service of Peace along with our prayers and supplications. If war widows from all Nations stand united in prayer, sacrifice and immolation [!], then peace will be assured.⁷⁸

75. *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*, 1er trimestre 1932.

76. The Federal Union attempted to convince the government to keep war orphans in the army from seeing combat duty in Morocco during the 1925 uprising there, but to no avail. *Bulletin périodique de l'Association départementale des veuves de guerre de la Charente-Inférieure*, no. 2, 1-2.

77. *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*, 3e trimestre 1933, 40-41.

78. *Bulletin de l'Union catholique des veuves de la guerre*, January 1936, no pagination.

These interjections in favour of pacifism are particularly interesting since it is one of the few subjects not affecting war widows directly that the associations' publications ever discussed. Association leaders undoubtedly felt that women such as themselves had a special insight regarding anything that had to do with war and peace.⁷⁹ The fact that war widows' associations did not discuss other political issues shows the extent to which they remained conservative despite their advocacy of female suffrage. All women in interwar France found their horizons largely limited to their own doorstep and their concerns revolving around their families; not citizens in the full sense of the word, they were still defined largely by their relation with men, particularly their husbands.

The Associations and Remarried War Widows

As we have seen, war widows who chose to remarry initially had exactly the same rights as their single counterparts and received equivalent pensions. However, once the government began having doubts about the "generosity" of pensions during the mid-twenties, the right of these women to compensation was once again put in question. Ultimately, the 1925 modifications to this law were strangely ambiguous: remarried war widows were not stripped of their pensions as such, but these were frozen at their old rate, and became worth less and less as the franc's value fell over the coming years. The widows' associations that we have been looking at (with one notable exception) gave these women their complete support. Motivated by a sense of solidarity and justice as well as by simple self-interest, they demanded that the government put an end to its unwarranted discrimination against women whose material or emotional needs had left them no choice but to enter into wedlock a second time. In so doing, the associations tacitly admitted that most widows simply could not afford the luxury of eternal mourning despite the fact that they themselves peddled this ideal.

The issue of remarried war widows and their pensions became particularly pressing during the 1930s, and in 1932 the leaders of the Corrèze Association reasserted their support of such women. They accepted that many Frenchwomen and Frenchmen were hostile towards remarried widows, particularly in the countryside, and admitted that defending such women in these areas required a certain amount of courage. The Association would continue to stand by them, however, since it was a question of solidarity in the name of preserving the right to a pension for all war widows. Association leaders felt that the government, much like the general

79. A large number of veterans, whether disabled or not, were also ardently pacifist at this time. Borne and Dubief, *La crise des années 30*, 106.

public, did not understand the effect that the suppression of remarried widows' pensions would have on these women and their children, and the extent to which this modification of the law would represent a "monstrous injustice." After all, the 1831 law on military pensions had allowed remarried widows to keep their pensions, while the 1853 law on government pensions, which had not yet been modified as far it affected *civilian* pensions, likewise permitted remarried widows to conserve their pensions. It seemed completely unjust to the Association to treat a war widow differently from the widow of a civil servant or career military officer, while taking away a right that had been so clearly established for over a hundred years and confirmed several times was nothing short of an act of despoliation.⁸⁰ The Corrèze Association also showed solidarity towards remarried war widows because of the dangerous precedent that their situation was creating. Mrs. Vacher (who was still president) described how politicians were apparently determined to nip a little bit here and a little bit there to help balance the budget, and remarried war widows just happened to be the first category on the list.⁸¹ Vacher argued that the savings that the state hoped to bring about through such cost-cutting measures were illusory since these widows, sick and without resources, would become the state's responsibility.⁸²

The Charente Association had also begun to focus on the remarriage of war widows and the rights these women were entitled to, an issue that was perhaps particularly delicate in such a rural department. Association leaders tackled the question head-on with an ironic rhetorical question: "Is it because a husband has died on the field of honour that we have to pretend that there is nothing that a widow can do other than wear a mourning veil forever and give up all right to life, even though logic and the welfare of her children dictate otherwise?" The Association believed that this was in fact exactly the way that remarried widows were treated and that these women were often punished for some sort of imaginary transgression. As a result, it had become a widely accepted truism that war widows who had found a new source of support had no further claims on the generosity of the state. The Association's position was clear: remarried war widows did not lose their rights to a pension simply because they had managed to remarry.⁸³

The debate over the rights of remarried widows was fought all over France, but was particularly fierce and passionate in a few areas such as the Breton department of Morbihan.

80. *Bulletin de l'Association départementale corrézienne des veuves, orphelins et ascendants de la guerre*, 3rd and 4th semesters, 1932, 16-17, 19-21.

81. *Ibid.*, 1er trimestre 1933, 7.

82. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

83. *Bulletin périodique de l'Association départementale des veuves de guerre de la Charente-Inférieure*, no. 14 (March 1930), 2-3.

The small publication of the local war widows' association (which did not allow remarried war widows to join) gave both sides a chance to express themselves. One widow wrote in to explain her decision to remarry, and hers was no doubt a typical tale:

I became widowed in 1917 and had one child, who was not yet two years old when his father died. It wasn't with three francs a day that I was going to be able to put food on the table for him and for myself, so I was forced to leave him at home while I went out to work. It was at that point that I decided to remarry...I would very much like to join your organization, and I know a lot of women just like me who feel the same way. After all, our children are Wards of the Nation, but there is no one who can defend their interests.⁸⁴

The letter is remarkable for its blunt honesty, as this woman admits with no sense of shame that her primary reason for contracting a second marriage was economic. However, another letter in the same issue took a very different view of the situation:

Is it fair that the second husband should enjoy money that belongs to the first? Since the widow has found herself a new source of income, I think the second husband should be able to feed his wife and her children and protect them as well. This is so true that I could give you the name of several war widows who were crippled with debts. They remarried and, thanks to their pension, were soon able to pay back the money they owed, and a few were even able to buy farms...Why doesn't the government just suppress remarried widows' pensions? At a time when the state desperately needs to save money, that's where it should start.⁸⁵

This second letter was typical of the kind sent by disgruntled individuals to various widows' and war victims' associations. Seen from this perspective, the pension was not a "sacred debt," but rather compensation for a temporary financial setback for which the state had been partially responsible. Once the difficulty was past, the former widow had no more right to supplemental assistance than any other Frenchwoman. It was also typical for such critics to suggest that remarried war widows and their new husbands were able to live a very comfortable existence thanks to the largesse of the state, which provided the new couple with money they did not truly need. Although it is difficult to believe that an extra eight hundred francs a year (or its equivalent) allowed a struggling young peasant family in Brittany to live in the lap of luxury, such bitterness is perhaps understandable coming from someone in the same region, man or woman, who had never known anything but poverty and had never received any meaningful assistance from the state.

The Morbihan association, like most of its counterparts, ultimately sided squarely with

84. *Le Morbihan Mutilé: Organe mensuel de l'union départementale des mutilés, réformés, veuves, ascendants, et orphelins de guerre du Morbihan* no. 3 (June 1925), no pagination.

85. *Ibid.*

the remarried widows, and strongly objected whenever someone suggested suppressing their pensions. The president rhetorically asked if what these widows had done was such an “abominable crime,” arguing that more often than not the decision to remarry was motivated by financial difficulty, and sometimes by outright poverty. The simple fact was that a war widow’s pension was not enough to subsist on, leaving her with few alternatives. Under these circumstances, blaming a war widow for her decision to remarry was heartless:

Under the pretext that the war took away her first husband, will you pretend that this woman has become a cold, lifeless automaton with no feelings or emotional needs? Will you force her to guard her heart against love of any sort, prevent her from creating a new home, a new life, if she finds a companion worthy of her, who will comfort her and support her during her times of trial?

The president concluded his harangue by stating that he preferred to see a war widow marry again and remain an “honest woman” rather than become a concubine.⁸⁶ These latter arguments were commonly repeated ones, but the impassioned defence of a war widow’s right to rebuild her life without prejudice was rare: in general, even supporters of widows’ remarriage preferred to avoid discussing the emotional and sexual needs of these women.

In keeping with its non-conformist attitudes, the Federation of War Widows’ stance on remarriage was markedly different from that of other organizations. As early as 1925, the Federation had lobbied for the suppression of remarried war widows’ pensions, an “immoral advantage” that the law had granted them for far too long already. The association’s president claimed that such a position was completely in keeping with public opinion in that part of the country. The logic was simple and familiar: a remarried widow had found a new “protector” who would offer her support and affection, and therefore had no right to reparation from the state since the prejudice she had suffered had essentially been nullified. The president scoffed at those who claimed that eliminating remarried widows’ pensions was an incitement to immorality and non-marital unions: people who said such things obviously had a shockingly low opinion of women. On the contrary, the president claimed that there was a growing tendency for men in the marriage market to ignore young single girls in favour of war widows and their enticing pensions.⁸⁷ Needless to say, such a pattern of behaviour was not at all discernable at the national level: while the department of the Gard may have been a freakish exception for various cultural or economic reasons, it is far more likely that the association’s president had an overly active imagination. The average war widow did not have to worry about being stalked by hordes of

86. *Ibid.*, no. 39 (July 1928), no pagination.

87. *Journal des veuves de guerre* no. 3 (February 1925), no pagination.

unscrupulous young men wanting to marry her for her inadequate pension (although it is likely that if she had been, she would have had few qualms about being “caught”).⁸⁸

In short, associations were on the whole hostile to the 1925 law partly because they saw it as the “thin end of the wedge” or the first step down a slippery slope that could lead to massive cutbacks in war pensions.⁸⁹ In spite of such self-interest, however, the associations also acknowledged that remarriage was almost a necessity for many widows. It was more rare to admit that it might be perversely cruel to ask widows to ignore their emotional and physical needs in the name of an eternal fidelity that transcended death. Nevertheless, this support of remarriage on the part of widows’ associations proved that their leaders did not fully believe in the universal applicability of the stereotype of the “eternally faithful widow” that they normally relied on.

New Associations for Remarried Widows and Ensuing Conflict

Although widows’ associations took a keen interest in the plight of remarried war widows, certain of these women came to feel that they needed their own organizations in order to lobby the government more effectively. The two most prominent such associations did not arrive on the scene until the late 1920s, no doubt encouraged by the pension law of 1925 that created a two-tiered system which greatly disadvantaged widows who had remarried.⁹⁰ The two new associations did not see eye to eye and the hostility between them often spilled over, resulting in unbecoming scenes that ultimately harmed their credibility. This is hardly surprising

88. It is worth noting that the Catholic Union of War Widows never discussed the issue of remarried war widows in its publication. The omission is an interesting one, but it is unlikely that the ultra-religious organization would have approved of remarriage and the implicit betrayal of the “fallen hero.”

89. Despite some interesting insights, Stéphanie Petit’s recent article on this subject oversimplifies the attitudes of legislators and male veterans’ associations alike. Petit saw the attempts to exclude remarried war widows from keeping their pensions during the wartime debates as the result of patriarchal male dominance: “a wife is considered to be branded by her husband, becoming his property. As a result, she cannot decently belong to another, particularly when the first was a hero.” This analysis fails to take into account the attitude of more sympathetic, humane and rational law-makers in the Chamber (see page 80). Petit also considered the veterans’ associations to have been universally opposed to the remarriage of war widows. While there is some truth to this, which helps to account for the freezing of remarried widows’ pensions in 1925, she generalized far too much. Stéphanie Petit, “La pension de veuve de guerre 14-18,” 129, 131.

90. Remarried war widows were also disadvantaged in other subtle ways; for example, they were obliged to convoke a Family Council if they wished to continue acting as their children’s guardian. Failing this, their new husband automatically acquired this power, and the children’s pension bonuses would be paid directly to him. Widows had to notify the Ministry of Finance of their intent several months before the wedding and provide extensive documentation. *Bulletin trimestriel de l’Association d’aide aux veuves de militaires de la Grande Guerre*, no. 10 (January 1922), 4.

since one of the associations was led by a firebrand who saw enemies everywhere and whose honesty was not above suspicion, but it was nevertheless tragic. Both associations seemed to be trying to defend the rights of remarried widows with equal vigour, and argued persuasively that the decision to enter into wedlock a second time should not be held against them.

The National Federation of Remarried War Widows [*Fédération nationale de veuves remariées*, FNVR] was founded in late 1928 and operated under the auspices of the *Union national des mutilés et réformés*. The Federation began by soliciting new members with a rousing call to action that scolded women for their inaction:

You wanted to live without coming together as a group. You failed to pay attention to the calumnious accusations of which you were the object. You stood by passively and allowed public opinion to believe that *remarriage effectively erases or undoes the harm that we have suffered*. You have lived without concerning yourself about the ever growing number of your adversaries. Against their organizations and their forces, you have nothing but complete isolation. *You will now pay dearly for your indifference.*

The Federation reminded potential members that their pensions had not been readjusted to take into account the rising cost of living, and argued that legislators had become emboldened by this first success and would soon propose to eliminate war pensions for remarried widows altogether. The FNVR also wanted the children of remarried widows to receive the same treatment from the Wards of the Nation (see Chapter 2) as those of widows who had not remarried, and for remarried widows to be represented in the Office. The Federation also demanded that remarried war widows have access to reserved employment at the state, departmental and communal level, and that they should be the last people to be fired.⁹¹

An important part of the Federation's call to arms revolved around morality, its leaders arguing that a large number of single widows were living in concubinage in order to avoid losing their privileges (just as politicians had feared) and that honest women were being penalized for having entered into matrimony. Finally, the Federation urged women who were interested to encourage other war widows to join up, because "these indifferent women are compromising our actions with their inertia." Widows were warned that a few thousand members would not be enough to get their message across to the public and to the Chamber of Deputies, who needed to have a sense of the large number of remarried widows in France.⁹²

Typical FNVR meetings made it clear that the organization was very concerned with

91. AN, Centre d'Archives Contemporaines [Fontainebleau], Fonds Moscou #3453 2001 0216/128. As of early 2004, these files are reportedly inaccessible. The material concerning the remarried widows' associations comes from the Parisian police, which kept an eye on these two new organizations.

92. Ibid.

broader feminist issues of the period, particularly as far as the vote was concerned. For example, at a reunion of 24 November 1930, which was attended by about 250 people, the evening's last speaker was Ms. Lehmann, a practising attorney and general secretary of the French League for the Rights of Women. After approving of the demands that she had just heard, Ms. Lehmann expressed her views on the inalienable right of women to participate in the political life of the nation. She reminded her audience that a woman became a virtual legal non-entity when she married, and explained that her League strove for the emancipation of women "so that her civil and political personality [could] be recognized as the equal of man's." She finished by claiming that "by uniting like this, you are walking the path of good feminism. Continue to do so, and you will eventually be able, along with all the women that I represent, to liberate yourself from the legal incapacity that the Civil Code has burdened you with. And, like men, do not hesitate to demand your right to life!" These concluding remarks were also greeted with much applause.⁹³

Another meeting, this time of the Parisian section of the FNVR, emphasized the need for unity and patience in the face of adversity. A certain Mme. Brochet began by refuting the myth that remarried widows were all merry ones who had long since forgotten the husband who had died at the front and had created a new home for themselves. Brochet assured her listeners that remarried widows, numbering over three hundred thousand as they did, could obtain the changes they wanted if they put enough effort into it and were patient. The next speaker tempered Mrs. Brochet's enthusiasm by warning that the Federation had only managed to sign up forty thousand members in southern and central France, and that this was insufficient to bring real pressure to bear on the government. Other speakers reminded the audience that for politicians, the elector was of primordial importance, and that while the cause of the remarried war widows was a just one, they also had powerful support at their disposal in the form of their new husbands' ballots. Finally, a member of the S.F.I.O. took the stage to proudly announce that his party had adopted a motion put forth by socialist women to support equality of pension for all women who had lost a

93. The meeting was presided over by Mr. Gratien, a deputy of the Seine department, who was pleased with the progress that the organization had made both in Paris and in the provinces, gaining members and making the public and law-makers aware of the plight of remarried widows. Numerous other speakers took the stand to congratulate the association's members and leaders and to encourage them to do even more, particularly when it came to increasing the pensions of remarried widows to the level of those who remained single. Three deputies from the Seine were present at the meeting, and promised that these demands would have their full backing in the Chamber when the time came, indicating that the Federation did enjoy some political support. AN, Centre d'archives contemporaines [Fontainebleau], Fonds Moscou #3455 2001 0216/128, "Réunion organisée par le "Groupe de la Seine de la Fédération Nationale des Veuves de Guerre Remariées" le 24 Novembre 1930."

husband during the Great War. The speaker assured the women present that they would not have to cast about for support when they went before the Chamber of Deputies, since all its socialist members stood firmly behind their demands.⁹⁴ Ultimately of course, neither their husbands' ballots nor Socialist support were of much help to these remarried war widows.

It was at about this time (the summer of 1929) that "lively polemics" broke out between the Federation and certain rival organizations, most notably the National Union of War Widows [*Union nationale des veuves de guerre*, UNVG]. Founded at about the same time as the FNVR, the UNVG was the other major association representing remarried war widows in interwar France, and its fiery, hot-tempered president, Mrs. Merias-Munsch, did not have a good reputation (indeed, numerous complaints had been lodged regarding her and her organization). The National Union of War Widows was held in widespread contempt by almost all veterans' associations, who saw it as an organization whose only purpose was to take money away from its members for the personal needs of the President. The UNVG was in open conflict with similar organizations representing war widows, in particular the FNVR, which was considered much more respectable because it was "mentored" by the *Union Nationale des Mutilés et Reformés*. The hostility came to a head in October 1928, when Merias-Munsch called a meeting in Paris at which two representatives of the FNVR (both men) showed up to defend themselves against the slanderous remarks that were being made against them. However, these individuals were forbidden to take the floor, and Merias-Munsch punched the FNVR's general secretary, a disabled veteran. A general scuffle ensued, during which the two men "were struck many times."⁹⁵

Munsch was extremely outspoken and did not hesitate to criticize those she considered to be hostile to remarried widows, even among veterans' associations. As a result, UNVG meetings tended to be heated, especially when there were audience members who did not agree with the president. Only a few months after the aforementioned reunion, another typically confrontational meeting of the UNVG took place in Paris. Mrs. Munsch got things underway herself by expressing dismay and anger at a few large and prominent associations whose publications supposedly displayed hostility towards remarried war widows and herself, such the *Union Nationale des Combattants* and *Le Journal des Mutilés et Reformés*. She went on to list deputies, press agencies (Havas) and publishing houses (Hachette) that she considered hostile to the cause, but this name-dropping drew a few boos and exclamations of protests from certain

94. Ibid., "Assemblée générale de la Fédération nationale des veuves de guerre remariées. 1er Juillet 1929."

95. Ibid., "3 Mai 1930."

audience members. Munsch finished by calling for solidarity among all the veterans who had spilled their blood together on the battlefield, and this wish was met with applause.

However, it was not long before the meeting degenerated into acrimony and confusion. Mrs. Munsch announced that a demonstration would take place before the Chamber of Deputies the next day, and she invited all those who “were not afraid” to take part. Shortly after this, a man who had spoken earlier in the evening was called an “idiot” by an audience member: the speaker responded to this by slapping his interlocutor, which provoked a ruckus in the room. Members of the *Jeunesses patriotes* separated the antagonists and the meeting resumed.⁹⁶ Shortly after this, a M. Delmotte, a militant of the FNVR, took the tribune, claiming that he was doing so only because Mrs. Munsch had personally singled him out when criticizing veterans’ organizations hostile to the plight of war widows. He tried to explain that Mrs. Munsch’s accusations were sheer nonsense, that the proposal for legal reform that was currently being discussed in the Chamber was a result of his initiative, and that the Union National was simply trying to take credit for it. At this point Mrs. Munsch leaped up and started yelling “Lies! All lies!” and the meeting ended in chaos.⁹⁷

Munsch also became rather keen on the issue of women’s votes. In May 1930, she reminded members of her association that Paul Reynaud, the new Minister of Finances, was a partisan of women’s suffrage, and that his wife had often and in many different ways tried to drum up public support for such a reform. Munsch proposed that the organization should pay a little visit to the Ministry the very next day in order to remind Reynaud of his promise. She

96. The *Jeunesses* were nationalist, antiparliamentarian street-fighters (a “league,” of which there were a great many in France during the 1930s) supported by a few Deputies from the extreme right and several municipal councilors. Borne and Dubief, *La crise des années 30*, 93. The fact that they were providing security at a meeting of the UNVG is extremely interesting, although there is no further mention of them in the file.

97. AN, Centre d’archives contemporaines [Fontainebleau], Fonds Moscou #3455 2001 0216/128, “Réunion organisée par l’Union nationale des veuves de guerre, Salle Wagram, avenue Wagram, le 21 octobre.” This unedifying spectacle was particularly ironic in light of another speech given that evening by a plain-spoken, one-armed veteran who warned his listeners that a united front was necessary. He began by explaining that the law-makers of 1919 had not wanted to see single and remarried war widows treated any differently or prevent the orphans of the war from having a father, even if it was not their own. This speaker then criticized the divisions that had arisen between different veterans’ and victims’ associations:

You’re fighting each other over obscure doctrinal matters, over associations and personalities, and that’s where our weakness comes from. Don’t forget that if the Hun doesn’t pay, you’ll have to, and it’ll be because you weren’t willing to stand together! We need to stand united! Join whatever association you want, but when it comes to the big questions, we all have to stand shoulder to shoulder, and then our voices will be heard!

His words were obviously not heeded despite the fact that the two rival organizations had a great deal in common and were theoretically trying to achieve the same goal.

went on to explain that war widows had to support other women's groups and causes to advance their own, and suffrage was certainly a big part of this. Although she did not make the link explicit, there can be little doubt that she, like many of her colleagues, believed that winning the vote for women would make law-makers more amenable to their demands for pension reform. The last speaker of the evening insisted on the same point and accused women of being too modest: "you proved your mettle during the war when replaced the men who had gone off to the field of battle...We want men to recognize what we did, and we want the vote."⁹⁸

However, Munsch could not contain her animosity for long, and the more noble aspirations of her associations were soon subsumed to unseemly squabbles with other organizations. Munsch felt special animosity towards one small veterans' association, the *Confédération française des anciens combattants*. On 13 May 1930, the National Union demonstrated noisily in front of the publishing house of the organization's newspaper, which had called for the suppression of all war widows' pensions. Four years later, Munsch was still on the warpath, and did not hesitate to launch an official protest against André Neau, president of the *Confédération*. This public feud came to the attention of the *Direction de la Sûreté Générale*, which concluded that Munsch was "bereft of scruples" and had chosen to create an association "for lucrative gains and not for any noble-minded goal."⁹⁹

These brief glimpses of the UNVG do not allow us to determine the accuracy of the accusations levelled at its founder and president. Irrespective of what the truth may have been in that regard, there is no doubt that the UNVG and the FNVR had the same goal and both seemed to be doing their best to help remarried war widows.¹⁰⁰ One cannot help but wonder what would have happened had the two organizations worked together and had not Munsch's dubious reputation cast a long shadow over their demands. However, by the early 1930s war widows were struggling to preserve their meagre pensions, a task made all the more difficult by the fact that they were usually no longer burdened with small children and therefore lost a great deal of public sympathy. In these circumstances, remarried war widows were fighting a hopeless battle: if the government and the public was not always sympathetic to single war widows, there was

98. Ibid., "Réunion organisée par l'Union Nationale des Veuves de Guerre. Le 2 Mars 1930."

99. Ibid.

100. Indeed, many of Mrs. Munsch's speeches resembled those given by the FNVR. Such was the case when she insisted that remarried war widows had the moral right to receive the same pension as single ones: "They accuse us of having tried to rebuild our lives. But the fact remains that we have suffered a moral and material prejudice and that we have demonstrated integrity and honesty, since we tried to legally create a new family, whereas certain widows live in concubinage." Ibid., "Réunion extraordinaire des veuves remariées de l'Union nationale des combattants. Le 10 octobre."

little chance for women who had a man who could, in theory, provide for them and their children. The pension revision of 1925, in creating a new hierarchy of war victims that was in line with public opinion, sealed the fate of remarried widows until after the Second World War.

* * * * *

What do the publications of French war widows' associations have to tell the historian? They are unsatisfactory sources for a scholar trying to understand how war widows lived and managed to cope with the loss of the household's main earner. The associations, in their attempts to influence the government and perhaps win the sympathy of society at large, quickly came to rely on melodrama and a few stereotypical conventions. Even when "the widow" written about was not a religious fanatic, she often came across as a generic and hollow creation, imbued with a few necessary attributes (devotion to the departed husband, love of her children) that could only be omitted at the risk of making her seem like a monster. Conversely, she had none of the faults or imperfections that might have made her appear human, and as a result she appears completely unreal. Indeed, it is all but impossible to know where the line between truth and poetic license lies. Without going so far as to say that the editors and writers behind the publications were writing purely fictional accounts, it is obvious that they sometimes took liberties to make the stories more striking or appealing. While a reader can learn a great deal about idealized war widows in the associations' publications, he or she will find little evidence of what these women were actually like and how they lived their lives. At best, the associations' publications reveal certain broad trends, such as the economic difficulties faced by war widows during the 1930s who were laid off and replaced by younger women. Even then, the material is largely anecdotal in nature and features too much dramatically sentimental rhetoric for the historian's liking.

Do these publications at least tell us something about the interplay between war widows and the government, about the degree to which women could influence law-makers in Third Republic France? Ultimately, the widows' associations had little impact on legislation: their attempts to defend war widows did not prevent the fluctuation of the franc from wreaking havoc with their pensions or the government from slowly losing interest in them, perhaps because they were few in numbers and had no way to directly influence legislators. All the rhetoric, the passion, the bitterness, the resentment and the moral outrage that found expression in various small *Journals* and *Bulletins* published throughout France was basically to no avail. An examination of these publications shows only that their contents had little relation to the implementation of policy on the part of the French state.

The importance of the associations lies in the fact that the women behind them believed that they *should* have had something to do with government policy. These widows felt that they had a right to criticize the state, to expect something more from it, and to harangue its representatives for its shortcomings and failures. Even though these individuals, as women, had no right to vote and were not citizens in the full sense of the word, they were of the opinion that the state owed them something and that their claims were just and fair. It is striking that the associations' demands for better treatment for war widows often went hand in hand with demands for full citizenship, and the two objectives were sometimes understood as being inseparable.

The reactions of war widows discussed above to the aid that was made available to them demonstrates the emergence of a new attitude towards state assistance, which was starting to be seen as a right.¹⁰¹ The government, by coming to the aid of hundreds of thousands of people affected by the Great War had greatly increased the scope of its activity. However, the people concerned had their own ideas in this regard, and did not hesitate to use the system for their own ends and to advocate change.¹⁰² This was most obvious when it came to the rights of remarried war widows to pensions, which was tirelessly championed by any number of associations in the face of governmental indifference.

Of course, things were not so simple. Just as politicians had conceived of war victims as exceptional cases who deserved a special form of aid that was not to be confused with state assistance, so too did war widows see themselves as "special." There was much talk from the associations about "sacred debts" and senior figures often made the point that assistance for war widows had been earned by the blood sacrifice of their husbands on the battlefield, an argument that has little to do with a welfare state as such. At other times, war widows were as unclear and confused about the basis for pensions as politicians had been during the debates leading up to the 1919 law. Nevertheless, the very struggle of war widows' associations to have their rights

101. Tim Smith, *Creating the Welfare State*, 5.

102. It is interesting to compare French war widows' associations with their Italian counterparts, particularly because women in both countries were not granted full citizenship until after the Second World War. Most Italian war widows' associations, as typified by the *Associazione nazionale madri e vedove dei caduti in guerra*, were at heart profoundly conservative and did not seek to challenge long-standing gender norms in any way. These organizations emphasized the traditional role of women as mothers, and made it clear that a woman's citizenship depended on her marital status. Like their French counterparts, the Italian associations sought to take advantage of the cult of the dead to pressure politicians and the public to "protect" innocent war widows as responsible men should do. Such traditionalism stands in stark contrast to the modernity of the associations as lobbying groups and the political dimension of the widows' activity. Francesca Lagorio, "Appunti per una storia sulle vedove di guerra italiane nei conflitti mondiali," *Rivista di Storia Contemporanea* 23-24, no. 1-2 (1994-95), 187-188, 190.

recognized represented a growing acceptance of state interference, a belief that society had the responsibility to help its disadvantaged citizens in a comprehensive and systematic fashion. This opinion was so widespread that it was even shared by reactionary and ultra-religious fringe groups such as the Catholic Union of War Widows.

Finally, as far as the role of the associations was concerned, it should be remembered that their role was not limited to advocacy and that their failure in this respect did not mean that they were useless. The various organizations that we have examined played an important role in providing their members with valuable information that could be of practical use to them. This role should not be underestimated, for it could not have been easy for a widow from the peasantry or working class (or even the middle class for that matter) to make heads or tails of the byzantine rules that regulated her pension allocations and the subventions for her children. Keeping track of the ways these regulations and laws changed over time represented even more of a challenge and was almost a full-time occupation. By providing a reference from which such information could be gleaned without too much difficulty, the associations were probably giving their members their money's worth.

Even more importantly, however, the associations created a sense of community and belonging among the war widows who joined them. These organizations and their publications offered encouragement and moral support to members, something that may have been very much appreciated. Faced with the challenges of life without a husband, often having to raise children on their own, many war widows were no doubt eager to seek out other women like themselves for had the same problems and had felt the same pain. Was it easier or more difficult for a war widow living in the Charente or Corrèze to find meet her counterparts than if she been living in Paris? Regardless of the answer, belonging to an association certainly made the task easier and provided access to a network of women that all had at least one thing in common.

CONCLUSION

The living conditions of widows described in Chapter 1 reveal how they had to survive however they could by piecing together income from various sources. The great majority had to work long hours doing painful work that paid very poorly, even if they were fortunate enough to receive a small pension payment or if their husbands had belonged to a mutual aid society. Widows were likely to spend the last years of their lives in massive institutions where they would still not be free from the demands of work. Nascent welfare measures were already important to widows prior to the Great War: the *hospices* such as Les Ménages were partly funded by the state, and without such institutions or a few francs a month from the Assistance Publique, poor widows would have been doomed to indigence. Despite this rudimentary assistance, however, Émile Cheysson was right to argue that the fate of widowed women did not truly interest legislators or the public. Widows therefore help us understand the extent to which the Third Republic remained conservative in terms of social welfare during its early years in spite of the important changes that were taking place.¹ It was only the advent of a murderous war that changed things for certain widows, as the state became more willing to help at least some Frenchmen and Frenchwomen deal with the vicissitudes of life.

The pension law of 1919 and the creation of the Wards of the Nation in 1917 represented an important turning point and created two distinct categories of widows in France. Eight hundred francs a year was not a great deal of money, even if supplemented with three hundred francs per child and another three hundred if that child had been adopted as a Ward of the Nation. Nonetheless, the widow who lost her husband on the battlefields of the Great War was, in her misfortune, more fortunate than the widow whose husband had died of pneumonia or in an industrial accident. The “civilian” widow was in truly dire straits, while the widow of the *poilu* was at least guaranteed a certain amount of assistance for the remainder of her days. Such assistance came at a price since it required letting bureaucrats peer into the war widow’s private life, second-guessing the choices she made about her children’s education, and judging her worth as a mother. The war widow also had to accept being at the mercy of an often impersonal

1. In many ways, the early Third Republic was reminiscent of previous regimes (such as the Restoration and July Monarchy) and their emphasis on *bienfaisance publique*, a unique mixture of public and private assistance to which people did not have a moral right and which was a last resort after the failure of self-reliance. These patterns of local, voluntary and limited state involvement in poor relief proved difficult to break, and we have seen how charity and mutual aid remained important at the beginning of the twentieth century even as the state became more interventionist. Matthew Ramsey, “Poor Relief and Medical Assistance in 18th and 19th Century Paris,” in *Health Care and Poor Relief in 18th and 19th Century Northern Europe*, eds. Ole Peter Grell, Andrew Cunningham and Robert Jütte, 294-295, 303.

administrative machine, one in which the extent of the help that she received was determined by the whims of a handful of bureaucrats in a distant capital.

In spite of all these inconveniences, the numbers reveal that very few war widows refused the aid that the state owed them, either in the form of pensions or subventions to the Wards of the Nation. A few women who had been left out in the cold desperately tried to convince authorities that the Great War had in one way or another led to their husbands' death and that they too deserved some form of assistance. How many more were filled with envy or bitterness at the thought that the French state, until then so reluctant to interfere in the lives of people, now saw fit to extend a helping hand to a select group of individuals? How many of these women would have cheerfully exposed their miserable, unhappy lives to the prying eyes of bureaucrats in order to obtain those subventions that the High Council of the ONPN considered too small to be of any use? It was surely impossible that such generosity on the part of the French state, no matter how limited its extent, would fail to change peoples' perceptions of what a government could and should do to help those members of society who had been dealt a particularly harsh blow by fate.

Widows were not the only women to experience hardships because of limited work opportunities, low wages, and the resulting difficulties of saving money to provide for oneself in old age. Likewise, all women suffered from a rigid gendered world-view in which they were all too often valued first and foremost as mothers rather than as human beings in their own right. A study of widows in Third Republic France therefore serves to highlight the discrimination and material difficulties faced by poorer women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Such an effort is therefore intrinsically valuable, particularly when one considers that widows were a statistically significant minority during the period in question.

But a study of war widows and their "civilian" counterparts also casts light on the development of the welfare state in interwar France. Historians have often expounded on the profound effects that the Great War had on European states and societies, but few have mentioned war pensions in this context.² Such an oversight is truly puzzling, particularly since payments to French war victims represented a very important transfer of wealth (see page 75)

2. Historians agree that the war facilitated the transition from a nineteenth-century system of charity to a more modern system of welfare, but they normally point to war-time policies such as the imposition of minimum wages rather than to war pensions. Paul Dutton, *Origins of the French Welfare State*, 4. The exception is Tim Smith, who argues that the Great War was a turning point in the development of the French welfare state because so many of the war's surviving combatants, along with the dependents of those who had died, had to be provided for by the state. Tim Smith, *Creating the Welfare State*, 93-94.

that affected a large number of people.³ It is almost impossible to believe that the widows' pensions paid out to over half a million women did not have some influence on the development of the welfare state.⁴ Although many legislators responsible for the pension law of 1919 and the creation of the Wards of the Nation in 1917 would have denied it, these men constructed what was essentially a well developed (albeit temporary and insufficiently generous) welfare system. Lawmakers had taken the first steps towards building such a system prior to 1914, but the devastation of the Great War temporarily diverted their efforts as priority was given to the victims of the conflict, who numbered in the hundreds of thousands. The activism of war widows' associations shows that some people had come to expect more from the state than ever before, and did not hesitate to ask for it. Any account of the development of social welfare in France must take into account the interwar episode described in this thesis.

That episode will perhaps require new ways of thinking about the rise of the welfare state and add a new dimension of complexity to the narrative. The preceding has shown that the situation during the 1920s was at once fluid and dynamic and riven with tension and contradictions. Not only did the newer, state-centred assistance system exist side-by-side with the older charity-based one, but it could sometimes be difficult to tell the two apart. Not simply binary opposites of each other, both relied on private initiative and a certain amount of state support. If nothing else, this thesis suggests that historians should start looking very carefully at the way that states used its resources during the first half of the twentieth century: money for social welfare was sometimes transmitted via very unexpected channels.

My research also shows that concern over the birthrate and natalism, two classical tropes of Third Republic historiography, are as inextricably linked with the rise of the welfare state as some historians have already suggested. The new interwar policy providing pensions to war widows was made more acceptable by the fact that women had long been seen as particularly worthy recipients of charity and had been favoured targets of early welfare measures.⁵ However,

3. In 1930, one in ten Frenchwomen and Frenchmen were classified as war victims and received some form of government assistance, a figure that did not decrease markedly by the eve of the Second World War. Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants, Tome 1. Histoire*, 170.

4. In her book on the development of the welfare state in Britain and France, Susan Pedersen argued that this had been the case with wartime separation allowances in Great Britain, which created "a precedent of real importance for family policy." Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State*, 109-113. By the Armistice, over 1.5 million women were receiving such allowances, which, in contrast to France, were universal rather than needs-based.

5. In 1900, two-thirds of French citizens receiving welfare payments were women (most of them widows). Allan Mitchell, *The Divided Path*, 98. Paul Dutton argued that the sexually specific nature of welfare policy predated the Third Republic, pointing out that the liberal tenets that had dominated French public thought during the nineteenth century were hostile to the idea of providing any sort of assistance to

this concern had often been the result of fears regarding depopulation and military weakness. The preceding has shown that such natalist thinking was never far from the thoughts of legislators and bureaucrats whose decisions affected the lives of war widows. For these men, the important thing was often protecting children, and it was purely incidental that this involved assisting their mothers. We have seen that war widows, or at least the associations representing them and the charities helping them, often tolerated such patronizing treatment, if only as a hard-headed stratagem to gain the sympathy of both the government and the public at large.⁶ Lacking the rights that came with full citizenship, there was little else that these women could do, but the strategy was nevertheless a problematic one since it relied on embracing, at least to a certain extent, the depiction of women as passive, weak victims. The state's assistance therefore came with a heavy price attached, and this suggests another type of tension to which narratives dealing with the rise of welfare state must be attentive to.

The effect of war pensions generally on the development of the welfare state intrigues me, and I plan to explore this topic further at a later time.⁷ More specifically, I will try to inscribe the policy shift represented by war pensions in the context of developing views on welfare and social risk during the interwar period. In his monumental book on the welfare state, François Ewald argues that work accidents only came to be seen as a social problem during the latter half of the nineteenth century, a phenomenon that was closely linked to industrialization. The liberal political thought prevalent in early nineteenth-century France had considered such accidents to be an irreducible reality, but by the turn of the century they were more and more

an able-bodied man unless he was utterly destitute. As a rational individual, a man, even if poor, was expected to plan for the future and take precautions against the uncertainties of life: if he failed to do so, the state had no responsibility to assist him. However, Dutton claimed that these same harsh tenets were more forgiving when it came to women, who were not considered to be rational individuals. It was widely accepted that a woman's lack of political and economic rights, along with her dependence on a man, made her quite vulnerable. Dutton is careful to point out that in spite of this, the French state was from generous when it came to assisting poor women. Paul Dutton, *Origins of the French Welfare State*, 5-6.

6. Clearly, the politicians who cobbled together the 1919 pension law usually saw war widows as little more than wives and mothers, and it would have been quite reasonable for associations and charities alike to take advantage of a mentality that they could do little to change. French feminists were certainly quite ready and willing to use natalist rhetoric to their advantage even when they did not really believe in it. Gisela Bock, "Poverty and Mothers' Rights in the Emerging Welfare States," 420.

7. Such a phenomenon was of course by no means unique to France, and a comparative analysis would be fascinating in spite of the difficulties involved. To give but one example, pensions paid out after the American Civil War (including those for widows) were quite generous, more so than comparative European welfare measures at the time. However, few of the small farmers and members of the working class who had taken part in the conflict were able to claim these pensions, meaning that no "mini welfare state" was created. Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, 131-132, 135.

often described as a social ill.⁸ This awareness led to new ways of thinking about responsibility, one that did not automatically entail fault on the part of either party. For Ewald, the law marked the beginning of what he calls a *société assurantielle* or “insurance society,” a contemporary epoch whose most marked characteristic is the “socialization of responsibility.” Ewald’s work speaks of a far-reaching change of *mentalité* in French society and among its elected legislators, who were starting to adopt a more collectivist attitude towards social problems.⁹ This new attitude in turn paved the way for universal social welfare, with individual *prévoyance* being replaced by social insurance.¹⁰

At least one historian has argued that the legislators behind the 1919 military pension law also conceived of war as a social risk, akin to old age or illness, that imposed new responsibilities upon the state.¹¹ And in fact, the influence of the 1898 law on accident insurance is obvious in the debates over the pension law.¹² I hope to investigate how this virtuous cycle continued and show how the pension law of 1919 and the new mentality that it represented paved the way for further social legislation during the interwar period.¹³

Such a project requires a focus on policy-making and a “big-picture approach” that will

8. François Ewald, *L'État Providence* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1986), 9-10, 16, 18, 22-23.

9. *Ibid.*, 226.

10. Janet R. Horne, *A Social Laboratory for Modern France: The Musée social and the Rise of the Welfare State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 206-207.

11. Harriet Jackson, “L’impact de la guerre 1914-1918 sur la protection sociale,” in *De la charité médiévale à la sécurité sociale*, ed. André Gueslin and Pierre Guillaume (Paris: Patrimoine, 1992), 117-22.

12. Jules Lugol, the rapporteur for the government’s pension committee believed that his colleagues had followed the model of the 1898 law in far too slavish a fashion, explaining that the initial decision to take away a widow’s pension when she remarried had been based on the 1898 law. Furthermore, the original draft of the pension law had not provided pensions to parents and grandparents, and this was the result of difficulties in applying the 1898 law, where it had proven very difficult to determine whether someone’s child had truly been a source of support. Lugol actually had to convince his colleagues not to base pensions on prewar earnings in the same way as the 1898 law, believing that this would have resulted in administrative chaos. JO, *Débats parlementaires. Chambre des Députés. Séance du 23 novembre 1917*, 3020-3021, 3023.

During the debates, Alexandre Bracke, a Socialist and journalist, presented a particularly interesting counter-proposal to the committee’s pension scheme which involved a national insurance scheme for war victims. Bracke explained that the committee’s report made it very clear that military pensions, which had once been seen as charity, were now seen as a right, and he argued that his own proposal was merely the next logical step. This was in turn part of a much wider social insurance program that Bracke had dreamed up to protect French citizens from all the hazards of modern society. This radical proposal did not enjoy widespread support in the Chamber, but its very existence is suggestive of the profound effect that the 1898 accident law had on legislators. *Ibid.*, Séance du 5 décembre 1917, 3144-3145, 3147.

13. I am thinking particularly of the law of 5 April 1928 on sickness, disability, maternity and old age insurance. This “Magna Carta of the French welfare state” extended hospital and sickness insurance to one-third of the French population, or roughly thirteen million people. Tim Smith, *Creating the Welfare State*, 131-132.

take me further away from the objective I had initially hoped to achieve when I began working on this thesis, that of understanding how widows lived. This will not be a great loss, since my success in this endeavour has been mitigated. Due to the limitations of the available sources, much of the above material discusses what the state and its agencies did, which entails certain risks¹⁴ and prevents me from getting at widows themselves. We only see such women as agents when we look at the associations that they formed, and even here, widows are apprehended only in a collective light and serve mainly as an example of the new ways in which citizens and non-citizens related to a newly interventionist state. The women themselves remain hidden.

When discussing war widows of the Great War in Germany, Karen Hausen concluded that

The silence surrounding the hard, gray, everyday realities of wartime and postwar life is part of the pathos of hero worship. The innumerable war monuments in the city squares block our view of the realities of war for these women. Instead, women are portrayed as *pietas*, suffering for the glory of their heroic sons...the discourse of public commemoration could not simultaneously maintain the mythos of male heroism and also acknowledge women's real, if mundane, hardships.¹⁵

Much the same could be said of these women's counterparts across the Rhine. The rhetoric deployed by politicians, public figures, bureaucrats, philanthropists and widows themselves often obscured the reality of war widows' everyday existence, which remain perhaps even less accessible than that of their prewar counterparts.

Like other historians who have ventured into the study of widowhood, my efforts have revealed the difficulties inherent in bringing to light the material and moral hardships of such a particular social sub-group. While it is relatively easy to discover isolated facts about these women, gathering enough information to fully understand how they lived and how they understood their situation can be all but impossible. Sadly, the fragments of these women's lives that can be found in archives seem best suited to discussions of fairly large-scale historical processes in which we lose sight of individuals.

14. The preceding shows that "the state," loosely defined, was not a monumental, gargantuan entity capable of imposing its will in terms of remarriage or morality. It is always tempting to fall into the trap of seeing the state as an all-powerful, Foucaultian entity, but the evidence belies this. Senior figures in the ONPN clearly disapproved of the behaviour of certain of the widows the government was helping, but normally overlooked minor transgressions and were extremely hesitant to take the ultimate step and strip a mother of her paternal authority. However, we should not ignore the fact that what appears to be respect for the capacity of mothers was in fact often the result of natalism: bureaucrats were motivated first and foremost by the needs of children, and if they were reluctant to take a child away from its mother, this was because they considered it primordial for the family unit to remain intact whenever possible. Even in these instances, war widows are in a sense relying on the whims of government.

15. Karen Hausen, "The German Nation's Obligations to the Heroes' Widows of World War I," 140.

Appendix 1: Widows in Third Republic France: A Brief Statistical Overview

In order to understand the numeric significance of widows on a national scale, one must turn to the French census, published every five years. However, this source has certain inherent limitations: not only were the censuses of the Third Republic less detailed than they would become after the Second World War, but they were not always consistent from one edition to the next in terms of the information presented, making it impossible to compare certain statistics over time. Furthermore, the choice of categories is often arbitrary: information that would logically complement the material presented is frequently absent, leaving the reader with an incomplete picture of the situation. However, what is most troubling for the scholar interested in widows is the fact that the census editors had the habit of grouping these women together with their divorced counterparts. While divorced women represented only a small fraction of the general population (see below), this oversight must be kept in mind.¹

These caveats aside, the census does allow us to ascertain certain facts. There was a large number of widows in France throughout the nineteenth century: the earliest reliable figure come from 1851, at which time there were over 1.6 million of them, accounting for nearly 10% of the country's female population. The number of widows and their share of the total female population increased steadily during the following decades:

1. A further difficulty is that the census editors were frustratingly inconsistent in the inclusion of non-French residents in overall statistics, and this can result in slight discrepancies from year to year.

Table 2: Widows and Divorced Women in the French Female Population: Absolute Numbers and Percentages, 1851-1911

Year	Women Aged 15-49		Women Aged 50+	
	#s	%	#s	%
1851	381,000	4.1	1,304,000	34.1
1856	437,000	4.6	1,297,000	34.2
1861	424,000	4.3	1,362,000	37.1
1866	439,000	4.5	1,406,000	34.0
1872	529,000	5.7	1,428,000	35.3
1876	510,000	5.4	1,510,000	36.1
1881	458,000	4.8	1,506,000	34.9
1886	489,000	5.1	1,460,000	33.8
1891	499,000	5.1	1,580,000	35.7
1896	503,000	5.1	1,647,000	36.7
1901	515,000	5.2	1,884,000	40.8
1906	502,000	5.0	1,935,000	41.3
1911	525,000	5.2	1,993,000	41.7

Source: Statistique Générale de France. *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 5 mars 1911 Tome I. Deuxième partie. Population présente totale* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1915), 22.

Bearing in mind the inaccuracies of nineteenth century censuses, these numbers must be taken with a grain of salt. One immediately notices the jump in relatively young widows that occurred in 1872 and 1876, which was surely the result of the Franco-Prussian war. What is more striking is the steady increase in the number of widows both old and young, and the percentage of the female population that they represented. The legalization of divorce in 1884 is insufficient to account for this phenomenon,² although it is reasonable to assume that the low French birthrate which so worried politicians (see Introduction) had something to do with this. Fewer deaths resulting from complications during childbirth meant that the average Frenchwoman was increasingly likely to outlive her husband.³

The age breakdown for the 2.3 million widows in France in 1911 is as follows in table 3:

2. As mentioned, French census-takers had the unfortunate habit of grouping together divorced women and widows in most of their published statistics. However, one exception in the 1911 census indicates that there were only 84,000 divorced women in France and over 2.3 million widows. It is reasonable to assume that there were even fewer women who had availed themselves of the new law during the 1890s and 1900s. Statistique Générale de France, *Résultats statistiques du recensement effectué le 5 mars 1911. Tome I. Deuxième partie. Population présente totale* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1915), 34.

3. The French birthrate had fallen from 33 per 1,000 inhabitants in 1800 to 20 per 1,000 in 1910. This latter rate was much lower than those in contemporary Germany (30) and Great Britain (25), perhaps helping to explain why France had more widows than those two countries (see below). Lynn Abram, *The Making of Modern Woman*, 107.

Table 3: Number of Widows in France per Age Group, 1911

Age Group	# of widows	# of women	%
15-19	779	1,544,301	<1
20-24	7,851	1,505,672	<1
25-29	23,839	1,493,449	1.6
30-34	47,818	1,445,118	3.3
35-39	76,970	1,357,440	5.7
40-44	118,726	1,261,965	9.4
45-49	170,698	1,190,923	14.3
50-54	226,512	1,081,948	21.0
55-59	275,943	953,821	28.9
60-64	338,820	868,738	39.0
65-69	356,475	713,764	50.0
70-74	330,647	532,048	62.1
75-79	228,516	317,102	72.1
80-84	128,052	160,333	79.9
85-89	42,143	50,025	84.2
90-94	9,315	10,776	86.3
95-99	915	1,055	86.7
100+	63	78	80.8
Total	2,384,082	14,487,502	16.5

Source: Statistique générale de France. *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 5 mars 1911. Tome I. Deuxième partie. Population présente totale*, 34.

The numbers are hardly surprising: the older a woman was, the more likely she was to be a widow. Once past the age of seventy, a woman was more likely than not to have outlived her husband, and one can safely say that the average widow was either “middle aged” or “old” (at least prior to the Great War).⁴ However, the odds of a woman being widowed started to increase significantly as soon as she entered her forties (although they rose even more markedly once she reached the age of fifty). Three-hundred thousand women in their forties were already widows, along with another 150,000 who were still only in their twenties or thirties. These figures are not insignificant, and demonstrate that a married Frenchwoman had a reasonable chance of suddenly finding herself alone at any given point in her life cycle.

This pattern, particularly as far as young widows in their twenties or thirties are concerned, is far different from what we would expect to find today. Even at the time, these numbers were somewhat unusual when examined in a Western European context, since France had a much higher percentage of widows than either Germany or Great Britain, with the disparity being particularly marked as far as young widows (under the age of forty-five) were concerned:

4. This is particularly true if we remember that women were considered to already be “old” by the time they turned fifty. See page 81, note 43.

Table 4: Widows by Age Group, 1911: France, Germany and U.K. (in thousands)

Age	France		Germany		U.K.	
	Total ♀	Total Widows	Total ♀	Total Widows	Total ♀	Total Widows
15-19	1,544	.779 (<1%)	3,138	0.368 (<1%)	2,119	0.1 (<1%)
20-24	1,505	7 (<1%)	2,802	5 (<1%)	2,075	3.1 (<1%)
25-34	2,938	71 (2.%)	4,933	67 (1.4%)	3,838	50 (1.3%)
35-44	2,638	195 (7%)	3,956	208 (5.3%)	3,082	158 (5.1%)
45-54	2,271	397 (18%)	3,037	459 (15.1%)	2,262	305 (13.5%)
55-64	1,821	615 (33.8%)	2,181	725 (33.2%)	1,514	428 (28.3%)
65-74	1,245	686 (55.1%)	1,342	745 (55.5%)	1,034	510 (49.3%)
75+	.538	408 (75.8%)	0.490	381 (77.8%)	0.421	293 (69.6%)
Total	19,402	2,384 (12%)	32,885	2,583 (7.9%)	23,275	1,751 (7.3%)

Source: Statistique générale de France. *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 5 mars 1911. Tome I. Deuxième partie. Population présente totale* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1915), 34, 152, 157.

The discrepancies revealed in table 4 are difficult to explain. They are perhaps the result of an unusually high death rate among Frenchmen, although a higher rate of marriage among the French seems like a more likely explanation,⁵ as does the lower French birthrate (see above, note 3).

Widows were not evenly distributed throughout the country, particularly the younger ones. In 1911, the highest and lowest percentages of widows between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine were to be found in the following departments:

Highest Percentages:

City of Paris	6.3
Seine (Paris suburbs)	5.7
Finistère	5.5
Manche	5.5
Bouches-du-Rhône	5.4
Calvados	5.4
Gironde	5.4
Alpes-Maritimes	5.2
Hérault	5.2
Seine-et-Oise	5.1

Lowest Percentages:

Deux-Sèvres	3.1
Vendée	3.2
Nord	3.3
Lozère	3.5
Loir-et-Cher	3.5
Ardèche	3.5
Six-way tie	3.6

Census editors pointed out that younger widows, unlike widowers, were more often found in departments with large urban centres, such as the Bouches-du-Rhône (Marseille), Alpes-

5. Today's wife is after all tomorrow's widow, and according to the same census information, 41% of French women were married in 1911, compared to only 35% in Germany and 34% in the United Kingdom. If the same difference was noticeable during the 1890s and 1900s, this would account for the higher percentage of French widows. Statistique Générale de France, *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 5 mars 1911. Tome I. Deuxième partie. Population présente totale*. (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1915), 34, 152, 157.

Maritimes (Nice), the Gironde (Bordeaux) and of course the Seine with Paris and its suburbs. They concluded that widows often had no choice but to remain in large cities due to the necessity of earning a living or receiving charity or public assistance, which was easier to do than in the countryside.⁶ This stands to reason, although it is more difficult to explain why widows were prevalent in certain rural and thinly-populated departments, particularly in Brittany and Normandy (Finistère, Manche, Calvados).⁷

In 1911, the Seine department accounted for approximately 11.5% of all widows in France, a figure that is relatively close to the 10.5% of the French population that it contained. However, the 80,246 widows between the ages of 15 and 49 in the same locale accounted for 17.5% of the 459,000 widows in that age group found in France.⁸ Why did so many young widows live in the capital? It is unlikely that Parisian women were more likely to lose their husbands than their rural counterparts, so these women presumably moved to there after their husbands' deaths, probably in hopes of finding employment. As the country's largest city and the centre of industry and commerce, Paris exercised a powerful pull on those looking for jobs.

Of course, widowhood was not necessarily a permanent condition, and many women who lost their husbands remarried. In her book on widows of the Ancien Régime, Beauvais-Bouytourie suggested that permanent widowhood became increasingly common towards the end of the eighteenth century.⁹ Statistics indicate that the trend of fewer remarriages among widows continued during the nineteenth century: Jacques Dupâquier states that second marriages (for both men and women) accounted for nearly 20% of all marriages between 1836 and 1840, but that this had decreased to just over 10% by 1913.¹⁰ The lack of information provided by the

6. Ibid., 29. This pattern was identified in Gunnlaugsson and Gardjarsdottir's Icelandic study.

7. Little changed in this regard during the next thirty-five years. The 1946 census provides a departmental breakdown of widowed women in the "fertile" age bracket of fifteen to forty-nine years of age. One is immediately struck by the high percentage of such widows in Brittany and Basse-Normandie, as well as in Paris. *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 10 Mars 1946. Vol. II, Population présente totale* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1953), 204, 219-220.

8. Two-hundred thousand of the 1.4 million women living in Paris proper were widows, and 60,000 of these were under the age of fifty. Eighty-thousand of the 480,000 women living in the rest of the Seine department were widows, 20,000 of them under the age of 50. Statistique Générale de France, *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 5 mars 1911. Tome II. Population présente. Résultats par département*. (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1915), 2, 18.

9. Scarlett Beauvais-Bouytourie, *Être veuve sous l'ancien régime*, 164-166.

10. *Histoire de la population française*, ed. Jacques Dupâquier (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1988), 348. See also Martine Segalin, "Le mariage," in Jacques Dupâquier et al., *Histoire de la population française. 3: De 1789 à 1914* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), 428. Dupâquier found that in 1856, the first year for which acceptable statistics are available, the majority of "second marriages" took place between widowers and single women (about 57.5%), while about 20% occurred between bachelors and widows, and 20% between widows and widowers. These second marriages accounted for about 18% of

French national census during the Third Republic makes it difficult to determine how this affected widows. In 1911, only 2,500 of the 200,000 widows living in Paris remarried, suggesting that this was a statistically insignificant phenomenon (although it did account for nearly 10% of all marriages in the capital that same year). Widows between the ages of 30 and 50 (who often had children and needed the income of a male breadwinner to help raise them) were most likely to remarry, and normally did so before ten years had elapsed. However, it is interesting to note that most women did not rush into a new marriage immediately, and often waited several years. In all likelihood, this was due more to a lack of marriage partners than to a choice to postpone remarriage on the part of the widow, who probably became more appealing once her children reached a certain age and were no longer dependent. It would obviously be dangerous to assume that this pattern held true in the rest of France.

Table 5: Length of Widowhood for Widows Remarrying in 1911 (Paris)

Age of Remarrying Widows	Length of Widowhood									Total
	< 1 year	1 year	2 years	3 years	4 years	5-9 years	10-14 years	15-19 years	20 years +	
< 25 years	2	35	22	11	5	2	-	-	-	77
25-29 years	1	69	68	44	26	51	-	-	-	259
30-34 years	6	87	93	65	64	126	19	3	-	463
35-39 years	8	87	86	69	74	151	46	14	-	535
40-44 years	2	51	51	53	22	129	59	32	7	406
45-49 years	3	42	33	20	24	102	49	36	23	332
50-54 years	1	28	22	19	13	56	46	26	24	235
55-59 years	2	13	11	4	2	23	24	18	25	122
60-64 years	-	9	4	6	4	16	11	3	10	63
65-69 years	-	3	4	1	3	4	4	1	8	28
70-74 years	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	3
75 & above	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
Total	25	426	394	291	237	660	259	133	99	2,525

Source: Seine. *Annuaire statistique de la ville de Paris, 1911* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1912), 311,.

Finally, one must remember that the majority of widows were also mothers, but the

all marriages in France that year. Marriages between widows and single men were remarkable for the fact that the average age of the two partners was almost exactly the same (34 years). Marriages between widowers and widows involved older partners, the average woman being 42 years old and the man 47. After the age of 25, a single woman was about as likely to get married as a widow, although both were far less likely to marry than widowers, established men who apparently made very desirable partners. A 35-year-old widower was more than twice as likely to get married within the next 15 years as a widow of the same age. As a result of this, there were always significantly more widows than widowers in the general population. Jacques Dupâquier, "Regrets éternels? Veuve et remariage en France au XIXe siècle," in André Burguière, Joseph Goy and Marie-Jeanne Tits-Dieuaide, eds, *L'Histoire grande ouverte : Hommages à Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 305-306, 308-309.

census information is sadly lacking in this respect. According to Michel Huber, there were nearly 12 million French families in 1911, 2.4 million of which were headed by widows. Only 15% of these heads of household were childless, and table 6 shows the number of children that these widows had:

Table 6: Number of Children per Widow-headed Household, 1911

# of children	
0	355,000
1	661,000
2	573,000
3	354,000
4	212,000
5	120,000
6	70,000
7	37,000
8	19,000
9	9,000
10+	7,000
Total	2,417,000

Source: Michel Huber, *La population française pendant la guerre* (Paris: PUP, 1931), 34.

However, these 2.4 million households included those of older widows whose children had left home, and the information is therefore grossly misleading. It appears impossible to determine how many widows had dependent children living with them, and this represents an important gap in our knowledge. Such an omission in the census seems all the more strange considering the government's obsession with birth rates at the time; in fact, a reader cannot help but be surprised at how little information the French census contained regarding women and families in general. In what seems like an ill omen, this means that even a cursory statistical overview of widows can only provide a limited amount of information.

At most, we can say that at the turn of the century, widows represented a significant percentage of the female population, particularly among "older" women broadly defined. Immediately prior to the First World War, there were just over 2.5 million widows in France, nearly 80% of them over the age of 50. In total, such women represented 12% of the country's female population, a figure that was higher than those of other Western European countries. At least in Paris, the majority of widows did not seem to remarry, and remarriage became less likely with advancing age. We know practically nothing about how many widows had dependent children, but widows young enough to have such children were over-represented in Paris and other large cities, along with a few rural departments.

A more thorough knowledge of widows' demographic patterns would require a systematic analysis of records in departmental archives. I have examined a small sample of Parisian widows based on census information from the interwar period, which hints at interesting patterns that raise many questions. The sample includes 1,500 widows (500 from the 1st arrondissement, 500 from the 14th and 500 from the 20th).¹¹ The average age of these women was approximately 58 in all three arrondissements. The majority of these women (over 1,100) were listed as heads of families, suggesting that widows, at least in the capital, did not usually become dependents living in the house of a child or other relatives.¹² In the 1st arrondissement, half the widows sampled lived completely alone, but the number was lower in the other areas (189 and 200). The phenomenon of widow or spinster "clustering" was apparently not as significant during the interwar period as Olwen Hufton had found it to be in the eighteenth century (see page 20). Certain of the findings are puzzling, such as the fact that over half of these women did not appear to have jobs, which is almost impossible.¹³ While one must bear in mind the well-known tendency of French census-takers to underestimate the number of women in the workforce,¹⁴ this number is still highly surprising. A more thorough sampling of this invaluable resource would be necessary to determine whether these trends held true for the city of Paris as a whole, although this would allow for a fascinating comparison with those patterns in the rest of country discussed above.

11. AP, 2 MiLN1926 1, 39, 53 "Liste nominative du dénombrement de la population de 1926." These lists, which provide details for every household in the city, form the basis for the published national census. Due to the sheer number of records, even a statistically valid sampling would require a very significant investment of time and effort. Since the Archives de Paris have these records for several subsequent census years, a longitudinal examination of households would be possible.

12. The chances of Icelandic widows living as dependents in their children's home during this same time-frame depended on the number of their offspring. Unfortunately, it is impossible to take this factor into account for France because the information is not included in the census. Gisli Gunnlaugsson and Olaf Gardjarsdottir, "Availability of Offspring and the Household Position of Elderly Women: Iceland, 1901," *Journal of Family History* 20, no. 2 (1995): 159-79.

13. Even during the Ancien Régime, there was a tendency not to list the profession of widows in censuses and tax rolls of various sorts. Historians have assumed that this is because the jobs in question were unskilled and paid very poorly. Lee Baker, "Survival Strategies of Widows in Dijon During the French Revolution," *Women's Studies* 31, no. 1 (2002): 58-59.

14. See for example Lynn Abrams, *The Making of Modern Woman*, 177.

Appendix 2: Black Widows, White Widows: The Demographic Impact of the Great War

All the old assumptions about the impact of the Great War on women are summed up in a recent work of synthesis by Eugen Weber, a well-respected historian. Weber, like many historians of the interwar period, was very fond of using the words “decline” and “decadence,” and linked these phenomena to the ravages of the Great War:

France became a country of elderly, and often single, women. Many spinsters threaded their way through the 1920s and thirties; many in a conventional society with conventional aspirations would be frustrated of marriage and motherhood. For a generation France was submerged by the dark weeds of mourning, the veils for the *grand deuil*, the crepe of *demi-deuil*, the sombre-coloured hats, gloves, shoes, dresses of widows and orphans and parents and kin either inconsolable or unable to afford a more cheerful garb.¹

To what extent is all this true?

There is no question that the effects of the Great War on the French population were devastating. But surprisingly, it is impossible to determine exactly how many war widows the Great War created in France. As surprising as it may seem, historians do not agree on the number of French soldiers who were killed during the conflict, but the minor variations in the estimates are less important than the fact that it is extremely difficult to reconstitute the background of these individuals, both in terms of marital status and social or geographic origin. Pension records for war widows and war orphans do not make matters any clearer, since the relevant ministries did not bother to actually count these women and provided conflicting estimates about their numbers. The only certainty is provided by the official census of 1921, which makes it clear that a large number of war widows had quickly remarried. Contrary to popular belief at the time, women, whether war widows or not, did not have a great deal of difficulty finding a marriage partner.

There is no agreement on exactly how many Frenchmen died in the Great War. Although this seems like a perfectly straightforward matter, the reality is that the French government and military had a good deal of difficulty providing the precise figures that everyone wanted during the war and shortly thereafter. Historians who have had to use these numbers as the basis of their work have been unable to completely lay the matter to rest. Jacques Dupâquier, in his monumental work on the history of the French population, finally settled on a

1. Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 14.

figure of roughly 1.35 million, and this is as good a choice as any.²

Determining the background of these 1.35 million men has also proven to be quite difficult and contentious, which means that there is no certainty regarding the socio-economic profile of the wives they left behind. Dupâquier argued that the rural population had been over represented among casualties, with peasants accounting for 41.5% of French deaths, whereas among young men they only represented 30% of the active population. Furthermore, Frenchmen who were mobilized in or near large cities were often posted at the rear, resulting in relatively low death rates for soldiers from the nation's large urban agglomerations (10.5% in Paris and 12.3% in Lyon). In contrast, the highest death rates were recorded in the military regions of the Centre and Ouest (20.2% in Orleans, 20% in Le Mans; 19.6% in Limoges; 19.5% in Rennes), all of which were centres of agriculture.³

Dupâquier's statistical analysis of Great War casualties was based on the work of Michel Huber, who independently investigated and documented war losses while he was head of the Statistique Générale de France during the interwar period. Huber argued that among the 1.35 million dead or missing Frenchmen, agricultural workers were by far the most important occupational group, accounting for 538,000 deceased soldiers. In contrast, commercial employees accounted for 123,000 of France's losses, while the liberal professions and civil servants were diminished to the tune of "only" 31,000 and 16,000 men. Huber did insist that these figures had to be taken with a grain of salt, since they were based on the stated occupation of the soldier when he was first incorporated at the age of twenty, which may not have been a very accurate reflection of reality. Furthermore, the list includes an important percentage of men engaged in occupations described only as "diverse," helping to make for a somewhat confused situation.⁴

2. *Histoire de la population française. 3. De 1789 à 1914*, ed. Jacques Dupâquier (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1988), 52.

3. *Ibid.*, 54.

4. Michel Huber, *La population de la France pendant la guerre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1931), 423. In a recent article, Adrian Gregory argues that Huber may have underestimated the Parisian participation in the war effort, at least in terms of the number of men killed. According to Gregory, roughly the same percentage of Parisian men seem to have been mobilized and killed as in the general French population (123,000 casualties in the Seine department). Desperately short of manpower, the French army apparently had no choice but to call upon Parisians, regardless of worries about working-class loyalties or suitability for armed duty. In absolute terms, the majority of these city-dwelling casualties came from the working classes, particularly unskilled and casual labourers. However, Gregory admits that his evidence is based only on the honour roll of the suburb of Clichy and biographical information, suggesting that his generalizations must be taken with caution. Adrian Gregory, "Lost Generations: The Impact of Military Casualties on Paris, London and Berlin," in *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919*, ed. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57-58,

Thus, all that we know for certain about war widows is that most of them lived in rural areas and worked in the agricultural sector, a conclusion that is hardly shocking since it fits so well with France's overall demographic patters. While we have only a vague idea of the fallen soldiers' social and geographic backgrounds, determining their age is a simple and straightforward matter. Huber offered the following breakdown in terms of percentages, to which I have appended the absolute numbers that this represents among the war's 1.3 million casualties:

20 years old & younger...	4.75%...	61,750
20-24 years old.....	27.0%...	351,000
25-29 years old.....	19.9%...	258,700
30-34 years old.....	18.3%...	237,900
35-39 years old.....	12.8%...	166,400
40-44 years old.....	10.8%...	140,400
45 years old & older.....	6.44%...	83,720 ⁵

These figures are very interesting: as we would expect, young men in their early twenties were at the forefront of the slaughter, but over four-hundred thousand men in their thirties also died, as did over two-hundred thousand men in their forties. This age profile would suggest that the conflict produced a high number of war widows, since older men were more likely to be married than younger ones.

Huber was also able to estimate the percentage of married soldiers among those killed as follows. I have added the number of married men (and hence of widows) that this represents:

1914=40.0%=120,400
1915=38.3%=133,284
1916=38.0%=95,760
1917=37.0%=60,680
1918=35.4%=83,190
Total.....492,314 ⁶

The percentage of married men killed actually decreased steadily as the war went on, although variations were minimal. Huber provides a more thorough examination which includes the age of the soldiers:

61, 64, 83.

5. Michel Huber, *La population de la France pendant la guerre*, 320.

6. Ibid. It must be noted that these numbers only yield a total of 493,000 married men killed during the war, a figure that does not even come close to the number of war widows that Huber will later suggest.

Table 7: Percentage of Married Men Among Deceased French Soldiers by Age Group and Year of Death:

Age	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919	1911 Avg.
15-19	--	0.5%	0.7%	1.2%	0.7%	0.7%	0.7%
20-24	4.9%	2.3%	2.8%	4.5%	4.5%	3.4%	10.9%
25-29	42.0%	31.9%	24.2%	17.9%	20.5%	27.2%	55%
30-34	64.9%	60.7%	54.1%	49.4%	52.7%	56.9%	75%
35-39	69.2%	69.8%	66.4%	65.6%	65.2%	66.9%	81%
40-44	71.9%	73.1%	71.1%	71.2%	70.5%	71.4%	83.0%
45-49	70.2%	74.9%	68.5%	73.2%	73.5%	72.6%	82.7%
50+	83.7%	77.4%	74.4%	72.8%	76.0%	75.8%	77.2%
Average	40%	38.3%	38.0%	37.0%	35.4%	37.3%	58.8%

Source: Michel Huber, *La population française pendant la guerre*, 321

Not surprisingly, we see that deceased soldiers were far more likely to be married if they were over 30 years of ages than if they were between 25 and 29 years of age, let alone younger than 25. Another striking feature of the table is that men between the ages of 25 and 34 were less likely to be married later in the war than they were earlier on, no doubt reflecting the fact that many of them had spent most of the war mobilized and did not have the chance to find life partners as they would have normally done. It also comes as no surprise that all but the oldest soldiers were significantly less likely to be married than were civilians in the 1911 census. Again, this is simply a result of mobilized men not having the opportunity to follow normal nuptial patterns. It is in a sense “fortunate” that soldiers were a third less likely to be married than their civilian counterparts, since it means that they left behind far fewer widows than they would have otherwise.

How many war widows did the Great War therefore actually produce? Not surprisingly, there is no single, clear and simple answer available to the historian. A careful observer will notice that the numbers provided above often do not match, and as a result scholars have had little luck reaching a consensus about the number of war widows. Although the information he presented on the marital status of the fallen soldiers implies the existence of just under half a million war widows, Michel Huber found the number of pensions provided to such women to be significantly higher. It is difficult to determine exactly how *much* higher, since the various ministries responsible for them did not initially bother to count the number of pensions (!) and provided different figures at different times.⁷

7. Ibid., 447. According to Huber, by 1919 the Statistique Générale thought that the number of pensions for war widows would eventually rise to 680,000. Three months later, the government had received almost exactly 600,000 requests for pensions from war widows, 150,000 of which did not have children. According to another parliamentary document, there were 600,000 active pensions for war widows in 1924,

Huber ultimately did not favour one figure over another, but historians have since chosen different numbers for different reasons. Alfred Sauvy based his estimates on two sets of figures: the first was published in 1927 in the *Journal des Mutilés et Réformés*, putting the number of war widows and war orphans at 630,000. The other figures used by Sauvy were those published by the Ministry of Pensions several years later when the bureaucrats started counting the war victims for which they were responsible and calculated figures for previous years. According to the Ministry, the number of war widows and orphans had varied as follows:

1922: 486,000

1926: 584,000

1933: 661,000

1938: 628,000⁸

Antoine Prost, in his monumental study of veterans' organizations, tried to get to the bottom of all this and determine how many war pensions the French government had been handing out during the 1920s. Comparing the figures of various government bodies (the Ministry of Pensions established individual's rights to pensions and calculated the amount, while the Ministry of Finances established definite titles and actually paid out the money) to each other and with the number of soldiers who died, Prost concluded that 600,000 war widows were drawing pensions in 1920. This number had decreased to 560,000 in 1925, but risen dramatically to 664,000 in 1931.⁹ Writing a decade or so after Prost, Dupâquier chose to favour certain estimates found in Huber's work, claiming that the slaughter created 680,000 war widows.¹⁰

What conclusions can be drawn from these varied estimates? It appears certain that the government was providing pensions to somewhere between 550,000 and 680,000 war widows during the early 1920s, although it is practically impossible to be any more precise. Why did the number of pensions vary so dramatically during the 1920s? As mentioned in Chapter 2, a widow who remarried could forego her pensions in return for a lump-sum payment, and several women must have availed themselves of this option, being struck from the rolls. In contrast, the widows of veterans who died as a result of injuries and illnesses contracted on the battlefield after

which included 250,000 remarried women (of these, 150,000 had children). According to a memo from the Ministry of Pensions, there were 630,000 active pensions for war widows in January 1928, with 262,500 of these being for remarried women.

8. Alfred Sauvy, *Histoire économique de la France*, 185-186. Both sets of figures, particularly those calculated retroactively by the Ministry of Pensions, seem much too low, unless they exclude remarried war widows.

9. Antoine Prost, *Les anciens combattants et la société française*. 2. *Sociologie*, 11, 13-14, 16.

10. Jacques Dupâquier, *Histoire de la population française*, Vol. 3, 52-53, 57.

hostilities had ended were eligible for pensions, and their numbers doubtless increased as the war grew more distant.

In light of the preceding figures, it is interesting to look at the census data to see whether we can spot these six-hundred thousand or so new young widows. The following table shows the evolution of widowhood in France from 1911 to 1936:

Table 8: Widows in the Female French Population, 1911-1936

Year	Total # of Widows	% of ♀ pop.	# of Widows aged 15-49	% of ♀ pop.
1911	2,431,000	12.1	459,000	4.5
1921	2,857,000	14.04	726,000	6.8
1926	2,784,000	13.31	613,000	5.6
1931	2,816,000	13.21	558,000	5.1
1936	2,874,000	13.4	487,000	4.7

N.B. From 1921 onwards, there are 90 departments rather than 87

Sources: République française, *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué* 1946, vol. II Population présente et totale, 158, 177.

The 1921 census reveals the damage that the Great War had wrought and the number of young widows that it had left behind, although the impact is not so obvious as we might imagine. In 1911 (the previous census year), there had been 1,219 widows for every 10,000 women in France (12.2%), but in 1921 the figure had increased to 1,404 (14%).¹¹ The 1921 census clearly shows a marked increase in the overall number of widows in France, and their importance as a percentage of the total female population. This is particularly true in regards to young widows between the ages of 15 and 49, whose numbers increased by 275,000 between 1911 and 1921, decreasing slowly thereafter as the women in question remarried or simply grew older. The large number of young widows in 1921 is certainly noticeable, but is not as high as one would assume based upon the number of soldiers killed. This leads to the unavoidable conclusion that a substantial number of young war widows had already remarried.

Looking at a breakdown of the ages of widows in 1921 is interesting:

11. République française, Ministère du Travail, de l'hygiène, de l'assistance et de la prévoyance générale. *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 6 mars 1921, Tome I, Deuxième partie* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1928), 28.

Table 9: Number of French Widows by Age Group, 1921

Age Group	# of widows	Total # of women	Widows as %
15-19	378	1,719,248	0.00021
20-29	84,775	3,196,045	2.7
30-39	299,016	3,013,369	9.9
40-49	341,322	2,775,213	12.3
50-59	544,105	2,309,595	23.6
60-69	748,196	1,729,719	43.3
70+	839,953	1,223,975	68.6
Total	2,857,745	15,967,164	17

Source: République française, *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 6 mars 1921. Tome 1, Deuxième partie* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1928), 26.

The fairly dramatic way that widowhood increases for women in their thirties suggest that this group was severely affected by the massacre of the Great War. However, it is difficult to know whether more of them were widowed to begin with, or whether they were simply less capable of remarrying than their younger counterparts.

Indeed, trying to estimate how many widows remarried during or soon after the war is all but impossible due to the disruption in overall marriage patterns. The number of marriages plummeted during the war itself as over eight million men were mobilized and a large portion of the country was occupied, then skyrocketed in 1919 and 1920 before slowly returning to prewar levels during the 1920s, as table 10 shows:

Table 10: Number of marriages, 1913-1924:

1913	298,900
1914	195,000
1915	82,000
1916	120,000
1917	175,000
1918	195,000
1919	552,700
1920	622,700
1921	455,500
1922	384,600
1923	355,100
1924	352,800

Source: Michel Huber, *La population française*, 631.

It is of course quite impossible to determine where remarrying widows (never mind remarrying war widows) may be hiding in these numbers.

The fate of remarrying war widows is closely related to the phenomenon of “white widowhood” which supposedly afflicted France in the war’s aftermath as young women were unable to find husbands and became condemned to a lifetime of celibacy. The unbalanced sex ratios that resulted from the war cannot be denied, yet the fact is that somewhere around 40% of war widows managed to remarry. Louis Henry convincingly demonstrated nearly forty years ago that perpetual female celibacy in interwar France was much less important than one might have assumed in spite of the death of 1.4 million men. Henry explained that widowers and young men who normally have remained single entered the marriage market, and that marriage patterns altered as women began marrying younger men. According to Henry, these changes did *not* occur at the expense of war widows, since these women were generally able to remarry with few problems. The phenomenon of “white widowhood” was therefore little more than a myth, and most French women seem to have been able to find a marriage partner.¹² Other historians have concurred¹³ with Henry’s judgement, but the myth of white widowhood nevertheless survives.

In short, we know that the Great War produced around 600,000 thousand war widows, but it is impossible to find out a great deal more about them. All that is certain is that many of them lived in the countryside and engaged in agricultural labour. Another certainty is that many of them remarried very soon after losing their husbands. Most war widows clearly could not afford the luxury of prolonged grief.

12. Louis Henry, “Perturbations de la nuptialité résultant de la guerre 1914-1918,” *Population XXI* (avril-juin 1966): 276, 278, 287. It should be noted that Henry is unable to analyse the marriage patterns of war widows per se, since the sources do not list them separately from other widows.

13. See for example Antoine Prost and Jay Winter, *Penser la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 227. The myth of “white widows” was popular in other European countries. During the 1920s, Florence White founded an organization to lobby for spinsters’ insurances in Britain. She argued that unmarried women were effectively war widows, having been robbed of the opportunity to marry by the carnage of the Great War. Government actuaries refuted this claim and demonstrated that the proportion of unmarried women in their thirties and forties was less in 1931 than it had been in 1911. Harold L. Smith, “Gender and the Welfare State: the 1940 Old Age and Widows’ Pensions Act,” *History* 80, no. 260 (1995): 386, 393.

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